

Science Fantasy

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SCIENCE FANTASY

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Contents

EDITORIAL	2
MAN IN HIS TIME <i>by Brian Aldiss</i>	5
THE WAR AT FOXHANGER <i>by Keith Roberts</i>	33
THE CHICKEN SWITCH <i>by Elleston Trevor</i>	44
SUSAN <i>by Alistair Bevan</i>	62
THE EXCURSION <i>by B. N. Ball</i>	76
OVER AND OUT <i>by George Hay</i>	117
HUNT A WILD DREAM <i>by D. R. Heywood</i>	119

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Editorial by Kyril Bonfiglioli

I don't suppose the editors of the *Journal of Ethnographical Studies*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Rabbit Breeder & Goat Fancier*, *The Times* and the *Anglican Review* get many letters from strangers reading more or less as follows:

"Dear Bon,

Finding myself unable to buy a copy of *Health & Efficiency* on Wigan Station the other day I resorted to a copy of your periodical. I am glad to see that you are still going—the friend I used to borrow mine from has gone into prison and I haven't seen it for months. Amused to see another story by old Ken & one by Bri., I suppose the others are all by old Chris under pseudonyms. Don't think much of your editorials though, very illiterate and rambling. I miss the old words and phrases—"extrapolation", "sense of wonder", "man's destiny", "tradition of H. G. Wells" ect., ect.. In fact, you may assume that I shall not go out of my way to borrow copies in future."

I get lots of them. I like them. But when I took over this editorship I had no idea that this was one of the fringe benefits, nor that I should find myself hotly defending my editorial policies against heated attacks from Ontario, Witwatersrand and Wigan. It is hard to say which is the more pleasant—the free and unfettered rudeness of the few or the generous, warm-hearted friendship of the many.

Many letters, of course, are full of well-reasoned criticism and comment and these are enormously helpful: it is surprising how many readers are journalists and these often have very informed and practical suggestions to make about layout and typography. The one kind of letter which really saddens one is the nostalgic "*why can't you . . .*" sort from a reader who cannot understand why we do not produce something exactly like *GALAXY* of twenty years ago. The answer is easy: bring back the writers who were young twenty years ago, bring back the excitement about the exploding post-war technologies, give us an American-size circulation and we could produce something even better. As it is, I think that British science-fiction today is neither moribund nor second-rate: if

readers will glance through the last six issues of this magazine and of NEW WORLDS and count the promising new names they will, I think, be bound to agree.

Moreover, there is one important factor today with which the "pulp" of the roaring forties did not have to compete: the anthologies. These are now pouring from the press and the temptation to expect anthology quality from an ordinary periodical is great, although palpably unfair. A new convert to science-fiction in the forties could only compare the magazine he was reading with the last issue, with its contemporaries and with such back numbers as he could pick up second-hand. The new reader today can, at the expense of a few shillings, arm himself with all the best stories written since science-fiction began—and sees none of the fourth-rate bilge which filled the dozens of short-lived magazines of that period: and which frequently found a niche in the good ones!

In short, the burden of my song is—Look: we have survived where dozens failed—and we are still improving

As to the letter column; I still receive six requests for such a feature to each plea for keeping it out, but have to remind myself that people who write in to ask for a letter-column are *ipso facto* letter-writers themselves. One cannot, therefore, ascertain the views of non-letter writers on the subject, and these are the enormous majority of readers. However, I am prepared to give it a try and see what happens.

POINTS FROM LETTERS

"I purchased the two most recent issues of SF out of curiosity and misguided patriotism. (Atavism?). I am pleased to report, however, that the book is slowly improving . . . As regards the name of the magazine, I would welcome a change. Failing that, would it not be possible to make the present name a little less conspicuous—the bottom of page 128, for example, would be a suitable place for it. . . ."

A mention in your editorial this time round to include "science fact" articles adds to my dismay—I would hate

to see the return of those horribly dull sermons on "Is There Life On Mars?" and "The Problems Our Spacemen Face". Lastly I would like to include my vote for the inclusion of a letter column.

—DAVID J. ORME

East Dulwich

"... *Science Fantasy* is improving at an almost exponential rate. *THE BLUE MONKEYS* was, I thought, superb—my only complaint, that I read it too quickly. I was not too happy about the preamble, which seemed a little too detailed. (I prefer Tolkien's method of simply stating the existence of his source-material; but then, Tolkien was presumably in direct contact with the hobbits.) Keith Roberts is a find of the first magnitude and Anita is delicious; please keep them both as long as you possibly can. . . . Your line-up for the next few months sounds awe-inspiring. Please ignore my meanderings and devote your efforts to editing a magazine which already rivals *F & SF* at its best."

—PETER WINCHURCH

Solihull

"We are really out of things up here on the Baltic, and I have just seen the first copy of *SCIENCE FANTASY* under your editorship, No. 68.

My God but it is a handsome production, I would like to go on record as saying that it is the most beautifully produced *SF* magazine that I have ever seen. My heartiest congratulations, Sir . . . May you always have the energy and the contributions needed to keep it this way."

—HARRY HARRISON

Snekkersten, Denmark

"I always buy your magazine because of the lovely covers and because the contents are the best sleeping medicine I know. Since two pages are usually enough to send me off, I find that each issue is equivalent to two months supply of sleeping-pills—and much better for me, I dare say. If I need a really strong soporific I try the editorial.

"May I have your autograph?"

(Mrs.) JUDITH MUGLISTON

Speen, Bucks.

MAN IN HIS TIME

by Brian Aldiss

His absence

Janet Westermarck sat watching the three men in the office: the administrator who was about to go out of her life, the behaviourist who was about to come into it, and the husband whose life ran parallel to but insulated from her own.

She was not the only one playing a watching game. The behaviourist, whose name was Clement Stackpole, sat hunched in his chair with his ugly strong hands clasped round his knee, thrusting his intelligent and simian face forward, the better to regard his new subject, Jack Westermarck.

The administrator of the Mental Research Hospital spoke in a lively and engaged way. Typically, it was only Jack Westermarck who seemed absent from the scene.

Your particular problem, restless

His hands upon his lap lay still, but he himself was restless, though the restlessness seemed directed. It was as if he was in another room with other people, Janet thought. She saw that he caught her eye when in fact she was not entirely looking at him, and by the time she returned the glance, he was gone, withdrawn.

"Although Mr. Stackpole has not dealt before with your particular problem," the administrator was saying, "he has had plenty of field experience. I know—"

"I'm sure we won't," Westermarck said, folding his hands and nodding his head slightly.

Smoothly, the administrator made a pencilled note of the remark, scribbled the precise time beside it, and continued, "I know Mr. Stackpole is too modest to say this, but he is a great man for working in with people—"

"If you feel it's necessary," Westermarck said. "Though I've seen enough of your equipment for a while."

The pencil moved, the smooth voice proceeded. "Good.

A great man for working in with people, and I'm sure you and Mr. Westermarck will soon find you are glad to have him around. Remember, he's there to help both of you."

Janet smiled, and said from the island of her chair, trying to smile at him and Stackpole, "I'm sure that everything will work." She was interrupted by her husband, who rose to his feet, letting his hands drop to his sides and saying, turning slightly to address thin air, "Do you mind if I say good-bye to Nurse Simmons?"

Her voice no longer wavered

"Everything will be all right, I'm sure," she said hastily. And Stackpole nodded at her, conspiratorially agreeing to see her point of view.

"We'll all get on fine, Janet," he said. She was in the swift process of digesting that unexpected use of her christian name, and the administrator was also giving her the sort of encouraging smile so many people had fed her since Westermarck was pulled out of the ocean off Casablanca, when her husband, still having his lonely conversation with the air, said, "Of course, I should have remembered."

His right hand went half way to his forehead—or his heart? Janet wondered—and then dropped, as he added, "Perhaps she'll come round and see us some time." Now he turned and was smiling faintly at another vacant space with just the faintest nod of his head, as if slightly cajoling. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Janet?"

She moved her head, instinctively trying to bring her eyes into his gaze as she replied vaguely, "Of course, darling." Her voice no longer wavered when she addressed his absent attention.

There was sunlight through which they could see each other

There was sunlight in one corner of the room, coming through the windows of a bay angled towards the sun. For a moment, she caught, as she rose to her feet, her husband's profile with the sunlight behind it. It was thin and withdrawn. Intelligent: she had always thought him over-burdened with his intelligence, but now there was a

lost look there, and she thought of the words of a psychiatrist who had been called in on the case earlier: "You must understand that the waking brain is perpetually lapped by the unconscious."

Lapped by the unconscious

Fighting the words away, she said, addressing the smile of the administrator—that smile must have advanced his career so much—"You've helped me a lot. I couldn't have got through these months without you. Now we'd better go."

She heard herself chopping her words, fearing Westermarck would talk across them, as he did: "Thank you for your help. If you find anything . . ."

Stackpole walked modestly over to Janet as the administrator rose and said, "Well, don't either of you forget us if you're in any kind of trouble."

"I'm sure we won't."

"And, Jack, we'd like you to come back here to visit us once a month for a personal check-up. Don't want to waste all our expensive equipment, you know, and you are our star—er, patient." He smiled rather tightly as he said it, glancing at the paper on his desk to check Westermarck's answer. Westermarck's back was already turned on him. Westermarck was already walking slowly to the door. Westermarck had said his good-byes, perched out on the lonely eminence of his existence.

Janet looked helplessly, before she could guard against it, at the administrator and Stackpole. She hated it that they were too professional to take note of what seemed her husband's breach of conduct. Stackpole looked kindly in a monkey way and took her arm with one of his noticeable hands.

"Shall we be off then? My car's waiting outside."

Not saying anything, nodding, thinking, and consulting watches

She nodded, not saying anything, thinking only without the need of the administrator's notes to think it, "Oh yes, this was when he said, 'Do you mind if I say good-bye to

Nurse"—who's it?—Simpson?" She was learning to follow her husband's footprints across the broken path of conversation. He was now out in the corridor, the door swinging to behind him, and to empty air the administrator was saying, "It's her day off today."

"You're good on your cues," she said, feeling the hand tighten on her arm. She politely brushed his fingers away, horrid Stackpole, trying to recall what had gone only four minutes before. Jack had said something to her; she couldn't remember, didn't speak, avoided eyes, put out her hand and shook the administrator's firmly.

"Thanks," she said.

"*Au revoir* to both of you," he replied firmly, glancing swiftly: watch, notes, her, the door. "Of course," he said. "If we find anything at all. We are very hopeful . . ."

He adjusted his tie, looking at the watch again.

"Your husband has gone now, Mrs. Westermarck," he said, his manner softening. He walked towards the door with her and added, "You have been wonderfully brave, and I do realise—we all realise—that you will have to go on being wonderful. With time, it should be easier for you; doesn't Shakespeare say in *Hamlet* that 'Use almost can change the stamp of nature'? May I suggest that you follow Stackpole's and my example and keep a little notebook and a strict check on the time?"

They saw her tiny hesitation, stood about her, two men round a personable woman, not entirely innocent of relish. Stackpole cleared his throat, smiled, said, "He can so easily feel cut off you know. It's essential that you of all people answer his questions, or he will feel cut off."

Always a pace ahead

"The children?" she asked.

"Let's see you and Jack well settled in at home again, say for a fortnight or so," the administrator said, "before we think about having the children back to see him."

"That way's better for them and Jack *and* you, Janet," Stackpole said. 'Don't be glib,' she thought; 'consolation I need, God knows, but that's too facile.' She turned her face away, fearing it looked too vulnerable these days.

In the corridor, the administrator said, as valediction, "I'm sure Grandma's spoiling them terribly, Mrs. Westermarck, but worrying won't mend it, as the old saw says."

She smiled at him and walked quickly away, a pace ahead of Stackpole.

Westermarck sat in the back of the car outside the administrative block. She climbed in beside him. As she did so, he jerked violently back in his seat.

"Darling, what is it?" she asked. He said nothing.

Stackpole had not emerged from the building, evidently having a last word with the administrator. Janet took the moment to lean over and kiss her husband's cheek, aware as she did so that a phantom wife had already, from his viewpoint done so. His response was a phantom to her.

"The countryside looks green," he said. His eyes were flickering over the grey concrete block opposite.

"Yes," she said.

Stackpole came bustling down the steps, apologising as he opened the car door, settled in. He let the clutch back too fast and they shot forward. Janet saw then the reason for Westerman's jerking backwards a short while before. Now the acceleration caught him again; his body was rolled helplessly back. And as they drove along, he set one hand fiercely on the side grip, for his sway was not properly counterbalancing the movement of the car.

Once outside the grounds of the institute, they were in the country, still under a mid-August day.

His theories

Westermarck, by concentrating, could bring himself to conform to some of the laws of the time continuum he had left. When the car he was in climbed up his drive (familiar, yet strange with the rhododendrons unclipped and no signs of children) and stopped by the front door, he sat in his seat for three and a half minutes before venturing to open his door. Then he climbed out and stood on the gravel, frowning down at it. Was it as real as ever, as material? Was there a slight glaze on it?—as if something shone through from the interior of the earth, shone through all things? Or was it that there was a screen between him

and everything else? It was important to decide between the two theories, for he had to live under the discipline of one. What he hoped to prove was that the permutation theory was correct; that way he was merely one of the factors comprising the functioning universe, together with the rest of humanity. By the glaze theory, he was isolated not only from the rest of humanity but from the entire cosmos (except Mars?). It was early days yet; he had a deal of thinking to do, and new ideas would undoubtedly emerge after observation and cogitation. Emotion must not decide the issue; he must be detached. Revolutionary theories could well emerge from this—suffering.

He could see his wife by him, standing off in case they happened embarrassingly or painfully to collide. He smiled thinly at her through her glaze. He said, "I am, but I'd prefer not to talk." He stepped towards the house, noting the slippery feel of gravel that would not move under his tread until the world caught up. He said, "I've every respect for 'The Guardian', but I'd prefer not to talk at present."

Famous Astronaut Returns Home

As the party arrived, a man waited in the porch for them, ambushing Westermarck's return home with a deprecatory smile. Hesitant but businesslike, he came forward and looked interrogatively at the three people who had emerged from the car.

"Excuse me, you are Captain Jack Westermarck, aren't you?"

He stood aside as Westermarck seemed to make straight for him.

"I'm the psychology correspondent for 'The Guardian', if I might intrude for a moment."

Westermarck's mother had opened the front door and stood there smiling welcome at him, one hand nervously up to her grey hair. Her son walked past her. The newspaper man stared after him.

Janet told him apologetically, "You'll have to excuse us. My husband did reply to you, but he's really not prepared to meet people yet."

"When did he reply, Mrs. Westermarck? Before he heard what I had to say?"

"Well, naturally not—but his life stream . . . I'm sorry, I can't explain."

"He really is living ahead of time, isn't he? Will you spare me a minute to tell me how you feel now the first shock is over?"

"You really must excuse me," Janet said, brushing past him. As she followed her husband into the house, she heard Stackpole say, "Actually, I read 'The Guardian', and perhaps I could help you. The Institute has given me the job of remaining with Captain Westermarck. My name's Clement Stackpole—you may know my book, 'Persistent Human Relations', Methuen. But you must not say Westermarck is living ahead of time. That's quite incorrect. What you can say is that some of his psychological processes have somehow been transposed forward—"

"Ass!" she exclaimed to herself. She had paused by the threshold to catch some of his words. Now she whisked in.

Talk hanging in the air among the long watches of supper

Supper that evening had its discomforts, although Janet Westermarck and her mother-in-law achieved an air of melancholy gaiety by bringing two Scandinavian candelabra, relics of a Copenhagen holiday, onto the table and surprising the two men with a gay-looking hors d'oeuvre. But the conversation was mainly like the hors d'oeuvre, Janet thought: little tempting isolated bits of talk, not nourishing.

Mrs. Westermarck, Senior, had not yet got the hang of talking to her son, and confined her remarks to Janet, though she looked towards Jack often enough. "How are the children?" he asked her. Flustered by the knowledge that he was waiting a long while for her answer, she replied rather incoherently and dropped her knife.

To relieve the tension, Janet was cooking up a remark on the character of the administrator at the Mental Research Hospital, when Westermarck said, "Then he is at once thoughtful and literate. Commendable and rare in men of his type. I got the impression, as you evidently did,

that he was as interested in his job as in advancement. I suppose one might say one even *liked* him. But you know him better, Stackpole; what do you think of him?"

Crumbling bread to cover his ignorance of whom they were supposed to be conversing, Stackpole said, "Oh, I don't know; it's hard to say really," spinning out time, pretending not to squint at his watch.

"The administrator was quite a charmer, didn't you think, Jack?" Janet remarked—perhaps helping Stackpole as much as Jack.

"He looks as if he might make a slow bowler," Westermarck said, with an intonation that suggested he was agreeing with something yet unsaid.

"Oh, *him!*" Stackpole said. "Yes, he seems a satisfactory sort of chap on the whole."

"He quoted Shakespeare to me and thoughtfully told me where the quotation came from," Janet said.

"No thank you, mother," Westermarck said.

"I don't have much to do with him," Stackpole continued. "Though I have played cricket with him a time or two. He makes quite a good slow bowler."

"Are you really?" Westermarck exclaimed.

That stopped them. Jack's mother looked helplessly about, caught her son's glazed eye, said, covering up, "Do have some more sauce, Jack, dear," recalled she had already had her answer, almost let her knife slide again, gave up trying to eat.

"I'm a batsman, myself," Stackpole said, as if bringing an old pneumatic drill to the new silence. When no answer came, he doggedly went on, expounding on the game, the pleasure of it. Janet sat and watched, a shade perplexed that she was admiring Stackpole's performance and wondering at her slight perplexity; then she decided that she had made up her mind to dislike Stackpole, and immediately dissolved the resolution. Was he not on their side? And even the strong hairy hands became a little more acceptable when you thought of them gripping the rubber of a bat handle; and the broad shoulder swinging . . . She closed her eyes momentarily, and tried to concentrate on what he was saying.

A batsman himself

Later, she met Stackpole on the upper landing. He had a small cigar in his mouth, she had two pillows in her arms. He stood in her way.

"Can I help you at all, Janet?"

"I'm only making up a bed, Mr. Stackpole."

"Are you not sleeping in with your husband?"

"He would like to be on his own for a night or two, Mr. Stackpole. I shall sleep in the children's room for the time being."

"Then please permit me to carry the pillows for you. And do please call me Clem. All my friends do."

Trying to be pleasanter, to unfreeze, to recall that Jack was not moving her out of the bedroom permanently, she said, "I'm sorry. It's just that we once had a terrier called Clem." But it did not sound as she had wished it to do.

He put the pillows on Peter's blue bed, switched on the bedside lamp, and sat on the edge of the bed, clutching his cigar and puffing at it.

"This may be a bit embarrassing, but there's something I feel I should say to you, Janet." He did not look at her. She brought him an ashtray and stood by him.

"We feel your husband's mental health may be endangered, although I hasten to assure you that he shows no signs of losing his mental equilibrium beyond what we may call an inordinate absorption in phenomena—and even there, we cannot say, of course we can't, that his absorption is any greater than one might expect. Expect in the totally unprecedented circumstances, I mean. We must talk about this in the next few days."

She waited for him to go on, not unamused by the play with the cigar. Then he looked straight up at her and said, "Frankly, Mrs. Westermarck, we think it would help your husband if you could have sexual relations with him."

A little taken aback, she said, "Can you imagine—" Correcting herself, she said, "That is for my husband to say. I am not unapproachable."

She saw he had caught her slip. Playing a very straight bat, he said, "I'm sure you're not, Mrs. Westermarck "

With the light out, living, she lay in Peter's bed

She lay in Peter's bed with the light out. Certainly she wanted him: pretty badly, now she allowed herself to dwell on it. During the long months of the Mars expedition, while she had stayed at home and he had got further from home, while he actually had existence on that other planet, she had been chaste. She had looked after the children and driven round the countryside and enjoyed writing those articles for women's magazines and being interviewed on TV when the ship was reported to have left Mars on its homeward journey. She had been, in part, dormant.

Then came the news, kept from her at first, that there was confusion in communicating with the returning ship. A sensational tabloid broke the secrecy by declaring that the nine-men crew had all gone mad. And the ship had overshot its landing area, crashing into the Atlantic. Her first reaction had been a purely selfish one—no, not selfish, but from the self: He'll never lie with me again. And infinite love and sorrow.

At his rescue, the only survivor, miraculously unmaimed, her hope had revived. Since then, it had remained embalmed, as he was embalmed in time. She tried to visualise love as it would be now, with everything happening first to him, before she had begun to—With his movement of pleasure even before she—No, it wasn't possible! But of course it was, if they worked it out first intellectually; then if she just lay flat . . . But what she was trying to visualise, all she could visualise, was not love-making, merely a formal prostration to the exigencies of glands and time flow.

She sat up in bed, longing for movement, freedom. She jumped out and opened the lower window; there was still a tang of cigar smoke in the dark room.

If they worked it out intellectually

Within a couple of days, they had fallen into routine. It was as if the calm weather, perpetuating mildness, aided them. They had to be careful to move slowly through doors, keeping to the left, so as not to bump into each

Other—a tray of drinks was dropped before they agreed on that. They devised simple knocking systems before using the bathroom. They conversed in bulletins that did not ask questions unless questions were necessary. They walked slightly apart. In short, they made detours round each other's lives.

"It's really quite easy as long as one is careful," Mrs. Westermarck, Senior, said to Janet. "And our dear Jack is so patient!"

"I even get the feeling he likes the situation."

"Oh, my dear, how could he *like* such an unfortunate predicament?"

"Mother, you realise how we all exist together, don't you? No, it sounds too terrible—I daren't say it."

"Now don't you start getting silly ideas. You've been very brave, and this is not the time for us to be getting upset, just as things are going well. If you have any worries, you must tell Clem. That's what he's here for."

"I know."

"Well then."

She saw Jack walk in the garden. As she looked, he glanced up, smiled, said something to himself, stretched out a hand, withdrew it, and went, still smiling, to sit on one end of the seat on the lawn. Touched, Janet hurried over to the french windows, to go and join him.

She paused. Already, she saw ahead, saw her sequence of actions, for Jack had already sketched them into the future. She would go onto the lawn, call his name, smile, and walk over to him when he smiled back. Then they would stroll together to the seat and sit down, one at each end.

The knowledge drained all spontaneity from her. She might have been working a treadmill, for what she was about to do had already been done as far as Jack was concerned, with his head's start in time. Then if she did not go, if she mutinied, turned back to the discussion of the day's chores with her mother-in-law . . . That left Jack mouthing like a fool on the lawn, indulging in a fantasy there was no penetrating. Let him do that, let

Stackpole see; then they could drop this theory about Jack's being ahead of time and would have to treat him for a more normal sort of hallucinatory insanity. He would be safe in Clem's hands.

But Jack's actions proved that she would go out there. It was insane for her not to go out there. Insane? To disobey a law of the universe was impossible, not insane. Jack was not disobeying—he had simply tumbled over a law that nobody knew was there before the first expedition on Mars; certainly they had discovered something more momentous than anyone had expected, and more unforeseen. And she had lost—No, she hadn't lost yet! She ran out onto the lawn, calling to him, letting the action quell the confusion in her mind.

And in the repeated event there was concealed a little freshness, for she remembered how his smile, glimpsed through the window, had held a special warmth, as if he sought to reassure her. What had he said? That was lost. She walked over to the seat and sat beside him.

He had been saving a remark for the statutory and unvarying time lapse.

"Don't worry, Janet," he said. "It could be worse."

"How?" she asked, but he was already answering: "We could be a day apart. 3.3077 minutes at least allows us a measure of communication."

"It's wonderful how philosophical you are about it," she said. She was alarmed at the sarcasm in her tone.

"Shall we have a talk together now?"

"Jack, I've been wanting to have a private talk with you for some time."

"I?"

The tall beeches that sheltered the garden on the north side were so still that she thought, 'They will look exactly the same for him as for me.'

He delivered a bulletin, looking at his watch. His wrists were thin. He appeared frailer than he had done when they left hospital. "I am aware, my darling, how painful this must be for you. We are both isolated from the other by this amazing shift of temporal function, but

at least I have the consolation of experiencing the new phenomenon, whereas you—"

"17"

Talking of interstellar distances

"I was going to say that you are stuck with the same old world all of mankind has always known, but I suppose you don't see it that way." Evidently a remark of hers had caught up with him, for he added inconsequentially, "I've wanted a private talk with you."

Janet bit off something she was going to say, for he raised a finger irritably and said, "Please time your statements, so that we do not talk at cross purposes. Confine what you have to say to essentials. Really, darling, I'm surprised you don't do as Clem suggests, and make notes of what is said at what time."

"That—I just wanted—we can't act as if we were a board meeting. I want to know your feelings, how you are, what you are thinking, so that I can help you, so that eventually you will be able to live a normal life again."

He was timing it so that he answered almost at once, "I am not suffering from any mental illness, and I have completely recovered my physical health after the crash. There is no reason to foresee that my perceptions will ever lapse back into phase with yours. They have remained an unfluctuating 3.3077 minutes ahead of terrestrial time ever since our ship left the surface of Mars."

He paused. She thought, 'It is now about 11.03 by my watch, and there is so much I long to say. But it's 11.06 and a bit by *his* time, and he already knows I can't say anything. It's such an effort of endurance, talking across this three and a bit minutes; we might just as well be talking across an interstellar distance.'

Evidently he too had lost the thread of the exercise, for he smiled and stretched out a hand, holding it in the air. Janet looked round. Clem Stackpole was coming out towards them with a tray full of drinks. He set it carefully down on the lawn, and picked up a Martini, the stem of which he slipped between Jack's fingers.

"Cheers!" he said, smiling, and, "Here's your tipples,"

giving Janet her gin and tonic. He had brought himself a bottle of pale ale.

"Can you make my position clearer to Janet, Clem? She does *not* seem to understand it yet."

Angrily, she turned to the behaviourist. "This was meant to be a private talk. Mr. Stackpole, between my husband and myself."

"Sorry you're not getting on too well, then. Perhaps I can help sort you out a bit. It is difficult, I know."

3.3077

Powerfully, he wrenched the top off the beer bottle and poured the liquid into the glass. Sipping, he said, "We have always been used to the idea that everything moves forward in time at the same rate. We speak of the course of time, presuming it only has one rate of flow. We've assumed, too, that anything living on another planet in any other part of our universe might have the same rate of flow. In other words, although we've long been accustomed to some oddities of time, thanks to relativity theories, we have accustomed ourselves, perhaps, to certain errors of thinking. Now we're going to have to think differently. You follow me."

"Perfectly."

"The universe is by no means the simple box our predecessors imagined. It may be that each planet is encased in its own time field, just as it is in its own gravitational field. From the evidence, it seems that Mars's time field is 3.3077 minutes ahead of ours on Earth. We deduce this from the fact that your husband and the eight other men with him on Mars experienced no sensation of temporal difference among themselves, and were unaware that anything was untoward until they were away from Mars and attempted to get into communication again with Earth, when the temporal discrepancy at once showed up. Your husband is still living in Mars time. Unfortunately, the other members of the crew did not survive the crash; but we can be sure that if they did, they too would suffer from the same effect. That's clear, isn't it?"

"Entirely. But I still cannot see why this effect, if it is as you say—"

"It's not what I say, Janet, but the conclusion arrived at by much cleverer men than I." He smiled as he said that, added parenthetically, "Not that we don't develop and even alter our conclusions every day."

"Then why was a similar effect not noticed when the Russians and Americans returned from the moon?"

"We don't know. There's so much we don't know. We surmise that because the moon is a satellite of Earth's, and thus within its gravitational field, that there is no temporal discrepancy. But until we have more data, until we can explore further, we know so little, and can only speculate so much. It's like trying to estimate the runs of an entire innings when only the first over has been bowled. After the expedition gets back from Venus, we shall be in a much better position to start theorising."

"What expedition to Venus?" she asked, shocked.

"It may not leave for a year yet, but they're speeding up the programme. That will bring us really invaluable data."

Future time with its uses and abuses

She started to say, "But after this surely they won't be fool enough—" Then she stopped. She knew they would be fool enough. She thought of Peter saying, "I'm going to be a spaceman too. I want to be the first man on Saturn!"

The men were looking at their watches. Westermarck transferred his gaze to the gravel to say, "This figure of 3.3077 is surely not a universal constant. It may vary—I think it will vary—from planetary body to planetary body. My private opinion is that it is bound to be connected with solar activity in some way. If that is so, then we may find that the men returning from Venus will be perceiving on a continuum slightly in arrears of Earth time."

He stood up suddenly, looking dismayed, the absorption gone from his face.

"That's a point that hadn't occurred to me," Stack-

pole said, making a note. "If the expedition to Venus is primed with these points beforehand, we should have no trouble about organising their return. Ultimately, this confusion will be sorted out, and I've no doubt that it will eventually vastly enrich the culture of mankind. The possibilities are of such enormity that . . ."

"It's awful! You're all crazy!" Janet exclaimed. She jumped up and hurried off towards the house.

Or then again

Jack began to move after her towards the house. By his watch, which showed Earth time, it was 11.18 and twelve seconds; he thought, not for the first time, that he would invest in another watch, which would be strapped to his right wrist and show Martian time. No, the one on his left wrist should show Martian time, for that was the wrist he principally consulted and the time by which he lived, even when going through the business of communicating with the earth-bound human race.

He realised he was now moving ahead of Janet, by her reckoning. It would be interesting to have someone ahead of *him* in perception; then he would wish to converse, would want to go to the labour of it. Although it would rob him of the sensation that he was perpetually first in the universe, first everywhere, with everything dewy in that strange light—Marslight! He'd call it that, till he had it classified, the romantic vision preceding the scientific, with a touch of the grand permissible before the steadying discipline closed in. Or then again, suppose they were wrong in their theories, and the perceptual effect was some freak of the long space journey itself; supposing time were quantal . . . Supposing *all* time were quantal. After all, ageing was a matter of steps, not a smooth progress, for much of the inorganic world as for the organic.

Now he was standing quite still on the lawn. The glaze was coming through the grass, making it look brittle, almost tinging each blade with a tiny spectrum of light. If his perpetual time were further ahead than it was now, would the Marslight be stronger, the Earth more translu-

cent? How beautiful it would look! After a longer star journey, one would return to a cobweb of a world, centuries behind one in perceptual time, a mere embodiment of light, a prism. Hungrily, he visualised it. But they needed more knowledge.

Suddenly he thought, 'If I could get on the Venus expedition! If the Institute's right, I'd be perhaps six, say five and a half—no, can't say—but I'd be ahead of Venerean time. I *must* go. I'd be valuable to them. I only have to volunteer, surely.'

He did not notice Stackpole touch his arm in cordial fashion and go past him into the house. He stood looking at the ground and through it, to the stony vales of Mars and the unguessable landscapes of Venus.

The figures move

Janet had consented to ride into town with Stackpole. He was collecting his cricket shoes, which had been restudded; she thought she might buy a roll of film for her camera. The children would like photos of her and Daddy together. Standing together.

As the car ran beside trees, their shadows flickered red and green before her vision. Stackpole held the wheel very capably, whistling under his breath. Strangely, she did not resent a habit she would normally have found irking, taking it as a sign that he was not entirely at his ease.

"I have an awful feeling you now understand my husband better than I do," she said.

He did not deny it. "Why do you feel that?"

"I believe he does not mind the terrible isolation he must be experiencing."

"He's a brave man."

Westermarck had been home a week now. Janet saw that each day they were more removed from each other, as he spoke less and stood frequently as still as a statue, gazing at the ground raptly. She thought of something she had once been afraid to utter aloud to her mother-in-law; but with Clem Stackpole she was safer.

"You know why we manage to exist in comparative

harmony." she said. He was slowing the car, half-looking at her. "We only manage to exist by banishing all events from our lives, all children, all seasons. Otherwise we'd be faced at every moment with the knowledge of how much at odds we really are."

Catching the note in her voice, Stackpole said soothingly. "You are every bit as brave as he is, Janet."

"Damn being brave. What I can't bear is—nothing!"

Seeing the sign by the side of the road, Stackpole glanced into his driving mirror and changed gear. The road was deserted in front as well as behind. He whistled through his teeth again, and Janet felt compelled to go on talking.

"We've already interfered with time too much—all of us, I mean. Time is a European invention. Goodness knows how mixed up in it we are going to get if—well, if this goes on." She was irritated by the lack of her usual coherence.

As Stackpole spoke next, he was pulling the car into a lay-by, stopping it by overhanging bushes. He turned to her, smiling tolerantly. "Time was God's invention, if you believe in God, as I prefer to do. We observe it, tame it, exploit it where possible."

"Exploit it!"

"You mustn't think of the future as if we were all wading knee deep in treacle or something." He laughed briefly, resting his hands on the steering wheel. "What lovely weather it is! I was wondering—on Sunday I'm playing cricket over in the village. Would you like to come and watch the match? And perhaps we could have tea somewhere afterwards."

All events, all children, all seasons

She had a letter next morning from Jane, her five year old daughter, and it made her think. All the letter said was: "Dear Mummy, Thank you for the dollies. With love from Jane," but Janet knew the labour that had gone into the inch high letters. How long could she bear to leave the children away from their home and her care?

As soon as the thought emerged, she recalled that during the previous evening she had told herself nebulously that

if there was going to be "anything" with Stackpole, it was as well the children would be out of the way—purely, she now realised, for her convenience and for Stackpole's. She had not thought then about the children; she had thought about Stackpole who, despite the unexpected delicacy he had shown, was not a man she cared for.

'And another intolerably immoral thought,' she muttered unhappily to the empty room, 'what alternative have I to Stackpole?'

She knew Westermarck was in his study. It was a cold day too cold and damp for him to make his daily parade round the garden. She knew he was sinking deeper into isolation, she longed to help, she feared to sacrifice herself to that isolation, longed to stay outside it, in life. Dropping the letter, she held her head in her hands, closing her eyes as in the curved bone of her skull she heard all her possible courses of action jar together, future lifelines that annihilated each other.

As Janet stood transfixed, Westermarck's mother came into the room.

"I was looking for you," she said. "You're so unhappy, my dear, aren't you?"

"Mother, people always try and hide from others how they suffer. Does everyone do it?"

"You don't have to hide it from me—chiefly, I suppose, because you can't."

"But I don't know how much you suffer, and it ought to work both ways. Why do we do this awful covering up? What are we afraid of—pity or derision?"

"Help, perhaps."

"Help! Perhaps you're right . . . That's a disconcerting thought."

They stood there staring at each other, until the older woman said, awkwardly, "We don't often talk like this, Janet."

"No." She wanted to say more. To a stranger in a train, perhaps she would have done; here, she could not deliver.

Seeing nothing more was to be said on that subject, Mrs.

Westermarck said, "I was going to tell you, Janet, that I thought perhaps it would be better if the children didn't come back here while things are as they are. If you want to go and see them and stay with them at your parents' house, I can look after Jack and Mr. Stackpole for a week. I don't think Jack wants to see them."

"That's very kind, mother. I'll see. I promised Clem—well, I told Mr. Stackpole that perhaps I'd go and watch him play cricket tomorrow afternoon. It's not important of course, but I did say—anyhow, I might drive over and see the children on Monday, if you could hold the fort."

"You've still plenty of time if you feel like going today. I'm sure Mr. Stackpole will understand your maternal feelings."

"I'd prefer to leave it till Monday," Janet said—a little distantly, for she suspected now the motive behind her mother-in-law's suggestion.

Where the "Scientific American" did not reach

Jack Westermarck put down the "Scientific American" and stared at the table top. With his right hand, he felt the beat of his heart. In the magazine was an article about him, illustrated with photographs of him taken at the Research Hospital. This thoughtful article was far removed from the sensational pieces that had appeared elsewhere, the shallow things that referred to him as The Man That Has Done More Than Einstein To Wreck Our Cosmic Picture; and for that very reason it was the more startling, and presented some aspects of the matter that Westermarck himself had not considered.

As he thought over its conclusions, he rested from the effort of reading terrestrial books, and Stackpole sat by the fire, smoking a cigar and waiting to take Westermarck's dictation. Even reading a magazine represented a feat in space-time, a collaboration, a conspiracy. Stackpole turned the pages at timed intervals, Westermarck read when they lay flat. He was unable to turn them when, in their own narrow continuum, they were not being turned; to his fingers, they lay under the jelly-like glaze, that

visual hallucination that represented an unconquerable cosmic inertia.

The inertia gave a special shine to the surface of the table as he stared into it and probed into his own mind to determine the truths of the "Scientific American" article.

The writer of the article began by considering the facts and observing that they tended to point towards the existence of 'local times' throughout the universe; and that if this were so, a new explanation might be forthcoming for the recession of the galaxies and different estimates arrived at for the age of the universe (and of course for its complexity). He then proceeded to deal with the problem that vexed other writers on the subject; namely, why, if Westermarck lost Earth time on Mars, he had not reciprocally lost Mars time back on Earth. This, more than anything, pointed to the fact that 'local times' were not purely mechanistic but to some extent at least a psycho-biological function.

In the table top, Westermarck saw himself asked to travel again to Mars, to take part in a second expedition to those continents of russet sand where the fabric of space-time was in some mysterious and insuperable fashion 3.3077 minutes ahead of Earth norm. Would his interior clock leap forward again? What then of the sheen on things earthly? And what would be the effect of gradually drawing away from the iron laws under which, since its scampering pleistocene infancy, humankind had lived?

Impatiently, he thrust his mind forward to imagine the day when Earth harboured many local times, gleaned from voyages across the vacancies of space; those vacancies lay across time, too, and that little understood concept (McTaggart had denied its external reality, hadn't he?) would come to lie within the grasp of man's understanding. Wasn't that the ultimate secret, to be able to understand the flux in which existence is staged, as a dream is staged in the primitive reaches of the mind?

And—But—Would not that day bring the annihilation of Earth's local time? That was what he had started. It could only mean that 'local time' was not a product of planetary elements; there the writer of the "Scientific

American" article had not dared to go far enough; local time was entirely a product of the psyche. That dark innermost thing that could keep accurate time even while a man lay unconscious was a mere provincial; but it could be educated to be a citizen of the universe. He saw that he was the first of a new race, unimaginable in the wildest mind a few months previously. He was independent of the enemy that, more than Death, menaced contemporary man: Time. Locked within him was an entirely new potential. Superman had arrived.

Painfully, Superman stirred in his seat. He sat so wrapt for so long that his limbs grew stiff and dead without his noticing it.

Universal thoughts may occur if one times carefully enough one's circumbendibus about a given table

"Dictation," he said, and waited impatiently until the command had penetrated backwards to the limbo by the fire where Stackpole sat. What he had to say was so terribly important—yet it had to wait on these people . . .

As was his custom, he rose and began to walk round the table, speaking in phrases quickly delivered. This was to be the testament to the new way of life . . .

"Consciousness is not expendable but concurrent . . . There may have been many time nodes at the beginning of the human race . . . The mentally deranged often revert to different time rates. For some, a day seems to stretch on forever . . . We know by experience that for children time is seen in the convex mirror of consciousness, enlarged and distorted beyond its focal point . . ." He was momentarily irritated by the scared face of his wife appearing outside the study window, but he brushed it away and continued.

". . . its focal point . . . Yet man in his ignorance has persisted in pretending time was some sort of uni-directional flow, and homogeneous at that . . . despite the evidence to the contrary . . . Our conception of ourselves—no, this erroneous conception has become a basic life assumption . . ."

Daughters of daughters

Westermarck's mother was not given to metaphysical speculation, but as she was leaving the room, she turned and said to her daughter-in-law, "You know what I sometimes think? Jack is so strange, I wonder at nights if men and women aren't getting more and more apart in thought and in their ways with every generation—you know, almost like separate species. My generation made a great attempt to bring the two sexes together in equality and all the rest, but it seems to have come to nothing."

"Jack will get better." Janet could hear the lack of confidence in her own voice.

"I thought the same thing—about men and women getting wider apart I mean—when my husband was killed."

Suddenly all Janet's sympathy was gone. She had recognised a familiar topic drifting onto the scene, knew well the careful tone that ironed away all self-pity as her mother-in-law said, "Bob was dedicated to speed, you know. That was what killed him really, not the fool backing into the road in front of him."

"No blame was attached to your husband," Janet said. "You should try not to let it worry you still."

"You see the connection through . . . This progress thing. Bob so crazy to get round the next bend first, and now Jack . . . Oh well, there's nothing a woman can do."

She closed the door behind her. Absently, Janet picked up the message from the next generation of women: "Thank you for the dollies."

The resolves and the sudden risks involved

He was their father. Perhaps Jane and Peter should come back, despite the risks involved. Anxiously, Janet stood there, moving herself with a sudden resolve to tackle Jack straight away. He was so irritable, so unapproachable, but at least she could observe how busy he was before interrupting him.

As she slipped into the side hall and made for the back door, she heard her mother-in-law call her. "Just a minute!" she answered.

The sun had broken through, sucking moisture from

the damp garden. It was now unmistakably autumn. She rounded the corner of the house, stepped round the rose bed, and looked into her husband's study.

Shaken, she saw he leaned half over the table. His hands were over his face, blood ran between his fingers and dripped onto an open magazine on the table top. She was aware of Stackpole sitting indifferently beside the electric fire.

She gave a small cry and ran round the house again, to be met at the back door by Mrs. Westermark.

"Oh, I was just—Janet, what is it?"

"Jack, mother! He's had a stroke or something terrible!"

"But how do you know?"

"Quick, we must phone the hospital—I must go to him."

Mrs. Westermark took Janet's arm. "Perhaps we'd better leave it to Mr. Stackpole, hadn't we? I'm afraid—"

"Mother, we must do what we can. I know we're amateurs. Please let me go."

"No, Janet, we're—it's *their* world. I'm frightened. They'll come if they want us." She was gripping Janet in her fright. Their wild eyes stared momentarily at each other as if seeing something else, and then Janet snatched herself away. "I must go to him," she said.

She hurried down the hall and pushed open the study door. Her husband stood now at the far end of the room by the window, while blood streamed from his nose.

"Jack!" she exclaimed. As she ran towards him, a blow from the empty air struck her on the forehead, so that she staggered aside, falling against a bookcase. A shower of smaller volumes from the upper shelf fell on her and round her. Exclaiming, Stackpole dropped his notebook and ran round the table to her. Even as he went to her aid, he noted the time from his watch: 10.24.

Aid after 10.24 and the tidiness of bed

Westermark's mother appeared in the doorway.

"Stay where you are!" Stackpole shouted, "or there will be more trouble. Janet, you see what you've done. Get out of here, will you? Jack, I'm right with you—God knows what you've felt, isolated without aid for three and

a third minutes!" Angrily, he went across and stood within arm's length of his patient. He threw his handkerchief down onto the table.

"Mr. Stackpole—" Westermark's mother said tentatively from the door, an arm round Janet's waist.

He looked back over his shoulder only long enough to say, "Get towels! Phone the Research Hospital for an ambulance and tell them to be here right away."

By midday, Westermark was tidily in bed upstairs and the ambulance staff, who had treated him for what after all was only nosebleed, had left. Stackpole, as he turned from closing the front door, eyed the two women.

"I feel it is my duty to warn you," he said heavily, "that another incident such as this might well prove fatal. This time we escaped very lightly. If anything else of this sort happens, I shall feel obliged to recommend to the board that Mr. Westermark is moved back to the hospital."

Current way to define accidents

"He wouldn't want to go," Janet said. "Besides, you are being absurd; it was entirely an accident. Now I wish to go upstairs and see how he is."

"Just before you go, may I point out that what happened was *not* an accident—or not as we generally define accidents, since you saw the results of your interference through the study window before you entered. Where you were to blame—"

"But that's absurd—" both women began at once. Janet went on to say, "I never would have rushed into the room as I did had I not seen through the window that he was in trouble."

"What you saw was the result on your husband of your later interference."

In something like a wail, Westermark's mother said, "I don't understand any of this. What did Janet bump into when she ran in?"

"She ran, Mrs. Westermark, into the spot where her husband had been standing 3.3077 minutes earlier. Surely

by now you have grasped this elementary business of time inertia?"

When they both started speaking at once, he stared at them until they stopped and looked at him. Then he said, "We had better go into the living room. Speaking for myself, I would like a drink."

He helped himself, and not until his hand was round a glass of whisky did he say, "Now, without wishing to lecture to you ladies, I think it is high time you both realised that you are not living in the old safe world of classical mechanics ruled over by a god invented by eighteenth century enlightenment. All that has happened here is perfectly rational, but if you are going to pretend it is beyond your female understandings—"

"Mr. Stackpole," Janet said sharply. "Can you please keep to the point without being insulting? Will you tell me why what happened was not an accident? I understand now that when I looked through the study window I saw my husband suffering from a collision that to him had happened three and something minutes before and to me would not happen for another three and something minutes, but at that moment, I was so startled that I forgot—"

"No, no, your figures are wrong. The *total* time lapse is only 3.3077 minutes. When you saw your husband, he had been hit half that time—1.65385 minutes—ago, and there was another 1.65385 minutes to go before you completed the action by bursting into the room and striking him."

"But she *didn't* strike him!" the older woman cried.

Firmly, Stackpole diverted his attention long enough to reply. "She struck him at 10.24 Earthtime, which equals 10.20 plus about 36 seconds Mars or his time, which equals 9.59 or whatever Neptune time, which equals 156 and a half Sirius time. It's a big universe, Mrs. Westermarck! You will remain confused as long as you continue to confuse event with time. May I suggest you sit down and have a drink?"

"Leaving aside the figures," Janet said, returning to the attack—loathsome opportunist the man was—"how can you

say that what happened was no accident? You are not claiming I injured my husband deliberately, I hope? What you say suggests that I was powerless from the moment I saw him through the window."

"'Leaving aside the figures' . . ." he quoted. "That's where your responsibility lies. What you saw through the window was the result of your act; it was by then inevitable that you should complete it, for it had already been completed."

Through the window, draughts of time blow

"I can't understand!" she clutched her forehead, gratefully accepting a cigarette from her mother-in-law, while shrugging off her consolatory 'Don't try to understand, dear!' "Supposing when I had seen Jack's nose bleeding, I had looked at my watch and thought, 'It's 10.20 or whenever it was, and he may be suffering from my interference, so I'd better not go in', and I *hadn't* gone in? Would his nose then miraculously have healed?"

"Of course not. You take such a mechanistic view of the universe. Cultivate a mental approach, try and live in your own century! You could not think what you suggest because that is not in your nature; just as it is not in your nature to consult your watch intelligently, just as you always 'leave aside the figures', as you say. No, I'm not being personal; it's all very feminine and appealing in a way. What I'm saying is that if *before* you looked into the window you had been a person to think 'However I see my husband now, I must recall he has the additional experience of the next 3.3077 minutes', then you could have looked in and seen him unharmed, and you would not have come bursting in as you did."

She drew on her cigarette, baffled and hurt. "You're saying I'm a danger to my own husband."

"*You're* saying that."

"God, how I hate men!" she exclaimed. "You're so bloody logical, so bloody smug!"

He finished his whisky and set the glass down on a table beside her so that he leant close. "You're upset just now," he said.

"Of course I'm upset! What do you think?" She fought a desire to cry or slap his face. She turned to Jack's mother, who gently took her wrist.

"Why don't you go off straight away and stay with the children for the weekend, darling? Come back when you feel like it. Jack will be all right and I can look after him—as much as he wants looking after."

She glanced about the room.

"I will. I'll pack right away. They'll be glad to see me." As she passed Stackpole on the way out, she said bitterly, "At least *they* won't be worrying about the local time on Sirius!"

"They may," said Stackpole, imperturbably from the middle of the room, "have to one day."

All events, all children, all seasons

—BRIAN W. ALDISS

Anyone not yet familiar with the Anita series of stories—of which this is the latest—should set about acquiring some back numbers immediately!

THE WAR AT FOXHANGER

by Keith Roberts

Granny Thompson's temper finally snapped when the jam refused to set. Anita stood by anxiously while the old lady spooned a sample onto a saucer, blew it, fanned it and then inverted it over the table. The jam wobbled, collected itself into a blob and fell off, plunk, onto the cloth. Granny Thompson gave a shout in which frustration and rage were nicely blended.

"Six hours! Nothink but bile an' bile, an' look at it! It ent even started . . . an' it *wunt*, I can tell yer that, not in a month o' Sundys. Yer kin tek it orf, it ent wuth wastin' 'eat on." She obeyed her own instruction, lifted the iron pot from the range and banged it down 'sizzling on the hearth. "Spelled," muttered the old woman, casting round for book and glasses. "Spelled, that's wot we are . . . an' I dunt need to arsk 'oo by, neither . . . look at it!" And she whacked the offending jam with a ladle, startling Anita who had leaned over, eyes closed, to sniff the mauve steam of blackberries.

Granny Thompson stirred the mess vigorously. "Ter see the spells om put in, an' orl . . . spells, spells, look, it's thick with 'em, but set . . . set it *wunt*. I'll give 'er spells . . ." She began to leaf through her book, muttering from time to time, licking her horny fingers, eyes gimleting behind her glasses. "Mice in the milk, that 'ent 'ot enough be 'arf . . ." She cackled. "Toads in the girdle, I reckon I'll 'ave a goo at that . . . no, I kent, we're out o' noots eyes. That's a very pertickler sort o' spell, y'ave to 'ave orl the ingredients right . . . I'll find summat, dunt you worry . . ."

Anita sighed. "Can't we just cook it some more, Gran? It's bound to go eventually."

"I tell yer it *wunt*," said Granny Thompson fiercely. "It's *cussed*, I tell yer . . . dunt yer think I knows a cussed pot when I comes acrorst it?"

"But Gran, if we just tried a bit longer . . ."

"It's that Aggie Everett," snarled Granny, still going through the book. "It's got orl the 'allmarks . . . boils an' buboes, sores an' rashes . . . git me that there big jar o' jollop orf the top shelf in the cupboard, om gooin' ter *start* . . ."

Anita stretched out her feet in the warmth and put her chin in her hands. A nauseous pot floated obediently into the room to touch down at her Granny's elbow. "An' the frogs legs, an' the cauldron," commanded the old lady.

Anita growled mutinously. "Do your own running about . . ." Granny Thompson glittered at her and she recanted hastily. She had defied the old lady once and there had been an affair with a hairbrush. Despite all manner of hastily-erected force fields Anita had been unable to prevent it from whacking her into sleeping on her face for a week . . . There was a clang from the kitchen and a shuffling as the spellpot started to work its way out from under the table. Anita sighed again, pushed back her long hair and watched while Granny Thompson began to work herself into her spellraising mood.

Anita knew Aggie Everett only too well; she was the nearest member of the sisterhood. Her house could be seen from Foxhanger, a pleasant little cottage standing on a rise of ground that overlooked the Fynebrook. Granny Thompson had tangled with her rival more than once in the past. Events always followed the same pattern. There would be a time of unpleasantness, of things catching fire or blowing up or falling over or altering horribly and wriggling away, and the battle would probably end with both witches getting their knuckles rapped from down under for wilcatting. Still that was the way it was; there was no arguing with her Granny in this mood, Anita knew better than to try.

While the witches' powers were more or less evenly

matched, their appearances could not have been more different. Granny Thompson was short and square; Aggie Everett was tall, thin and inclined to stoop. Granny Thompson's face was brown as a nut, and seamed with wrinkles; Aggie's complexion was pale and her skin seemed to be stretched like parchment over her sharp bones. Granny Thompson's eyes were snaky black, Aggie's were a rheumy, washed-out blue. Her hair was scraggy and long, her nose twitched with suspicion and distrust and dripped perpetually like a salty stalactite. Aggie's sense of honour was keen; if she had been spellraising, which was not improbable, what had happened would be nothing to what she would do when she felt the first crackle of the Thompsons' resentment.

The old lady lifted the pot onto the fire and added water. A familiar crackling and gurgling began inside. Granny Thompson drew up a chair and sat down with the book still in her lap. "Yisdey were the start," she pronounced, wielding the ladle. "That milk a-gooi' sour. 'That's Aggie,' I ses ter meself. 'Aggie, fer a pension. She allus starts orf with a traditional cuss an' then works up.'"

"But the whole truckload went wrong. Gran. The man told me."

"Course it did, wot d'yer use fer 'ead? She 'ad ter do the lot jist so's she could be sure o' gettin' *us*. I esspect she clapped one on it while it were a-gooi' by . . . an' the wust on it were, it were one o' them noo-fangled non-reversin' jobs. I fretted uvver that bottle," fumed Granny. "Tried ev'ry way I could *think* on but it wadn't no good. I thort I 'ad it——"

"And then it turned green, and blew up——"

"Very like," said the old lady complacently. "It were badly uvver-spelled. An' then it were rats. Now there ent no rats in this 'ouse, I *knows* there ent, an' yit I 'ears 'em scuttlin' orl uvver. 'Arf the night they was on . . . an' the things wot come out the tap this mornin' . . . now that's proof, if yer wants it . . ."

"Well, Gran, it could still have been an accident. Things do come out of taps sometimes, I've read about it."

"They dunt 'ave *golefish* in *reservoyers*," said Granny Thompson with the air of making a point.

"Well I don't care. I thought it was a pretty spell. I've got a bowl of them in my bedroom."

"Well tip 'em out," snarled Granny, "afore she teks thort an' turns 'em inter summat wuss, properly wi' *legs*. I dunt want you screamin' an' jumpin' arf the night, om got enough on me plate as it is . . . Toad that under the cold stone days an' nights 'ath thirty one sweltered venom sleepin' got, boil thou *fust* in the charmed pot . . ."

The contents of the cauldron began to heave, showing a little lake of flashing colour. Anita wandered outside. The night was very peaceful. She knew it wouldn't stay that way for long. She sat on the garden fence and brooded. Any moment now . . .

The first spell zipped out of the window, vaguely visible as a dark blue corrugation in the air. Another followed, and another. Anita counted sullenly. "That's the one about toads in the girdle, she must have found the newt-bits . . . and there's the one that does things to the legs of chairs . . . that's a big one, that must be for rheumatism." ('Twingin' screws' her Granny called it). Something passed Anita on the way in. The force was opposed by another. The cottage became haloed with blue sparks; there was a brief sensation of tussling and the spell went out with a pop. Anita shook her head. "Gran, you've done it again . . . blocked the dummy . . ." The real curse streaked in under her Granny's guard; there was a crash from within the cottage, and a scream of rage.

"An' that was the one that breaks up the tea service . . . and here comes the one that sets fire to her hat . . ."

Anita's ears swivelled suddenly and began to quiver. There was a calling. Not exactly an audible calling but nonetheless it was there. The sound came from Turnpike Farm. There were new tenants, with a new boy. Anita slid off the gatepost and began to run. She skimmed past a pond, kicking off her shoes as she went. Oh, he's not a child and he's not a man, he doesn't know whether I'm his mistress or his mother and neither do I . . . She leaped a ditch, legs gleaming in the moonlight, pirouetted across a

meadow. Oh to be a witch, there was nothing really like it . . . She sent a thought burrowing into a great sett, in and round and out again, left an indignant badger with a feeling of having been kicked in the sump, snarling and looking round for the enemy . . . across another field, through a wood . . . Turnpike Farm!

September nights can be chill but the hayrick was warm enough, particularly after they had dug themselves in a little way. Anita made her boy cry first then she took pity on him and helped him with the clasp of her dress and they were just getting to the nice part——

"Aaaaeeowwww . . ."

Anita's scream was as unexpected as it was horrible; beneath her, the haycock seemed to convulse. Snakes and toads erupted in a mass, spurting away down the sloping sides like green and brown water. Anita fell off the stack and ran, making a noise like an overworked two-stroke. A field away she stopped, panting, and a little latecomer wriggled between her bosoms and popped out of the top of her dress. It took three lengths of the pool by Brington Lock to make her feel even moderately clean. She circled for home, hissing. The fight had taken a personal turn.

The cottage had a distinctly beleaguered look. The fence was down in several places, the garden was strewn with debris and the chimney stack wore its one remaining pot at a rakish angle. Heat radiated out all round; Anita felt her hair crackle and blow back as she ran up the path. Near the door a particularly nasty familiar scuttled past, bearing a small flag and carrying something that was fizzing. It vanished among the trees and Anita heard a bang and an enraged clucking. She was vaguely glad. She had always loathed that creature anyway.

Inside, with the rumble of outgoing spells almost shaking the floor, Anita felt she was really in a battle. Granny Thompson was capering wildly, waving her book and pointing with her great stick. Enemy curses grounding in the garden had accounted for most of the damage but enough had got through to make a fair mess of the inside of the cottage as well. Mats were rucked up and thrown about, furniture leaned drunkenly on rubbery legs, the

kitchen was a mess of shattered preserves and the floor was covered with sherds, bits of tile and unaccountably, with feathers. Something nasty had evidently got in before being disrupted . . . Anita chittered with rage at the mess and set to work.

The fight went on into the small hours. Anita began to sweat but there was no giving up. She was becoming disturbed by the size of some of the curses. They threatened most thrilling things to her person . . . She shouted to her Granny. "She's in a terrible temper . . . what on earth did you do to her?"

"Didn't do nothink," panted the old lady, using her spell-stick like a machine gun. "It were 'er, the varmint . . . took uvver one o' my familiars. That there gret ginger cat, that one wot went orf that night . . . Four months I worked on that, jist got it ter Grade Two—Fetchin' an' Carryin' an' Bein' Unlikely—an' she guz an' *filches* it orf me. There it were sittin' in 'er winder bold as brass . . . 'Aggie,' I ses, 'that there cat ent yore property' . . . an' me 'at's down uvver me eyes an' om bouncin' orf down the path afore yer kin say knife . . . an' I wadn't in a mood ter be uncivil neither, not ter start with. 'Aggie,' I ses . . ."

"Gran, look out——"

Whooof . . . cerrrump . . .

"Atomics," panted Granny. "She 'as the nerve . . ."

"Gran, we've got to get out. If one of those hits us . . ."

"I ent never gettin' out," roared Granny. "I were spell-raisin' when Aggie Everett were bein' dandled on 'er mother's knee, I ent runnin' orf from the likes of 'er . . ."

"Gran, there's another one——"

WHOOMPH . . .

"You kin goo," cried the old lady valiantly. "Leave yer pore ole Gran ter cope, she's done it afore . . ."

"Don't be silly . . . in any case, she had me with snakes . . ."

Granny cackled, juggling something on the end of her stick that looked and acted like ball lightning. "Aggie wouldn't do a thing like that . . ."

"Gran! You don't mean——"

"Mucky young cat," roared the elder Thompson. "I knew

wot you were at . . . orl of a twitch yer were, I could feel it . . . time an' a place fer everythink . . ."

Anita's eyes went triangular with fury but she was too busy to take any reprisals even had she dared.

It had to end. Granny's masterpiece, a huge and complex curse that had to do with valency bonds, looped back onto the cottage and had Anita not been prompt with the chicken switch, house, inhabitants and most of Foxhanger would have been reduced to a dust having very odd physical properties. Anita gulped at the narrowness of the escape.

"Gran, come *on*. We can't keep this up . . ."

"I ent *gooin'* . . ."

"Strategy," pleaded Anita. "Tactics. Present a mobile target . . . we can get up close to her place . . ."

"Sulphur an' smoke an' the noise o' brass," shouted Granny, hugely pleased. "Gel's got 'ead arter orl . . ."

The two hares jostled each other through the copse and into the meadow beyond, accelerated across a sea of moonlight, ears flat, huge legs drumming. Anita exulted at the whipping changes of the low horizon, the rush of the air, the curve and swell of the grass that invited leaping and running and pounding.

"Gran, come on . . ."

"Steady up, gel. I ent got your *wind* . . ."

"Rot, you can go a lot faster. Come on, Gran, faster. I want to run until I'm mad . . ."

"'Old 'ard . . ."

"NO!"

"Change," shouted Granny suddenly. "Change, fer yer life . . ."

"Gran, I . . . I can't . . ."

"Jammed!" roared the old hare silently. "Aggie, you ole devil . . ." It skidded to a stop and sat up, quivering with strain. It seemed to swell, there was a thud, a flash of blue light . . . Granny Thompson, shoes and stick, long coat and old felt hat, sat up in the field, climbed puffing to her feet. Round her poured a hunt. The dogs ran silently, tongues lolling. Aggie's kennel of familiars, penned under

the trees of the far slope, burst into the open, vanished over the brow of the hill ahead.

Anita ran desperately, eyes bolting, white chest-fur glinting. The dogs fanned out in a half circle, heading her away from cover, cutting down her lead as she doubled. On top of the hill, Aggie's cottage windows blazed with blue light, shining in the dark like eyes. Granny Thompson moaned. The trap was laid and sprung; it was too late now, they'd lost. From every quarter of the field white flags sprang erect, rippling in the moonlight as their improbable bearers hurried them forward. The Thompson familiars, deployed in the open ground in front of the cottage, converged on the enemy stronghold. The night air became chaotic with messages though nothing was audible.

"Aggie, 'old 'ard . . . we give up, fetch 'em orf . . ."

"I kent . . . an' she's lorst orl 'er magic . . . things 'ave orl gorn rip . . ."

"Gran, my feet will kick . . . the blood will come out of my nose . . ."

There were 'no' sounds from the domestic animals, the awful killing-giggle of a weasel as the creature scurried along keeping the hunt in sight.

"AGGIE . . ."

"Keep a-runnin', gel. Come 'ere . . ."

The hare turned, racing for the cottage. Jaws clashed behind its neck. It leaped convulsively and there was a well, deep, dark, miles, falling . . .

"Mouse," thought Anita, terrified. "Something tiny, soft, no weight . . . please, a mouse . . ." Strange things happened in the shaft. There was a breathtaking thump, a noise like a pebble landing in moss. Then silence.

Granny Thompson danced on the edge of the hole. "Anita . . . gel, *wheer are yer* . . ."

Faintly, from a long way away. "Gran . . ."

"Are yer orlright?"

"I . . . I think so . . ." Anita tried to sit up on the ledge, and recoiled. "Gran, help . . ."

"Change," boomed the old lady, beside herself with worry. "Shapeshift. Try a bat."

"Gran, I can't . . . please help, there's worms . . ."

Aggie Everett bore down on her old enemy. "I didn't mean no 'arm ter the gel, things went orl of 'eap . . ."

"Chibblings," snarled Granny, wringing her hands. "If anythink 'appens to 'er, I'll 'ave you in *chibblings*, Aggie Everett . . . dun't think I *kent*, neither . . ."

"Gran, there's *worms* . . ."

"I couldn't 'elp it, I tell yer . . ."

"Big ones with collars round them," whimpered Anita, faint in the shaft.

Granny Thompson leaped back to the edge. "'Old still, gel, om a-comin' . . ."

"Yer kent," protested Aggie, hanging onto her arm. "Yer'll get *kilt*, it's miles deep. One o' yore spells must 'ave blowed the lid orf . . ."

"Our gel's down there . . ."

"Well, look . . ." The two old ladies conferred busily.

"Yes kent goo down without shapeshiftin'. An' if yer gits down there *small*, yer kent lift 'er . . ."

"She's lorst orl 'er magic," moaned Granny Thompson. "'Ad it orl knocked out on 'er, I shouldn't wonder . . ." Deep in the ground Anita started to sob. She was shivering, trying to draw her body into a tiny compass, but she was being touched horribly.

"Besoms," pronounced Aggie. "There ent no other way."

"I kent 'andle 'em."

"Surely you 'ave done."

"Spectakler," snarled Granny. "Dunt 'old with 'em . . . Orlright fer some I esspect. *I* ent never 'ad no call fer that sort o' thing."

Aggie was already dragging a great broom toward the shaft. Firefighting switches, they stack them in the wooded country in Northamptonshire. She poised the thing at the well-lip, stood back and made a pass. The broom became alight with little spots of blue fire. Granny stepped back a pace from the sparkling thing. "Om too *old* fer this sort o' mullockin' . . ."

"Well, I kent power it *an'* steer, yer must 'ave read the 'andbook . . ."

"Satan spare us," moaned Granny, straddling the broomstick and gripping with toes that were prehensile with

anxiety. "Ent never seen nothink like it in orl me life . . . Orlright, gel, om a-comin' . . . one way or the other . . ."

"Are yer ready?"

"I shent get ner readier wi' waitin' . . ."

"Five, four, three, two, one, LIFTOFF . . ."

"All s-systems go . . ." That in a gulpy voice from the shaft. The broom rose with a roar of sparks, hung a moment then slid into the depths. A nasty aerobatic; the thing was manoeuvring on its retros. The jets lit up slimy, dripping brickwork. Granny Thompson peered downward, shielding her eyes with the one hand she could spare.

"Gran, quick, the worms . . . they're awful . . ."

"Noot an' blindwumm do no wrung," bellowed Granny, glad to be of help. Anita squealed with relief. There was movement on the ledge; a wriggling exodus. The broomstick began to spin. "Verniers," shrieked Granny. Then, "Main jets . . . Aggie, fire main jets . . ." The besom hung poised on a level with Anita's shoulders. She climbed on instantly, hugging Granny as hard as she could.

Two old ladies were silhouetted craggily against the moon. "Aggie," said Granny Thompson largely, "Yore done a creditable thing. I dunt say as 'ow I 'olds with yer nor yer ways, an' it were you wot *started* it orl. But om gotta give yer me thanks. It wouldn't be right ter do no less."

Aggie grasped the gnarled hand that was offered her. "Maude," she said solemnly. "Om sorry. Om sorry about the jam an' the rats an' the golefish. Oo, an' the milk . . . an yer kin 'ave yer cat back tomorrer. Om made 'im up ter Grade One now—Sneakin' an' Prowlin' an' Bein' Above Suspishern." She raised her voice. "Familiars, *dismiss*; I shent need yer no more ternight." She turned back to Granny Thompson. "I wouldn't 'ave 'ad anythink 'appen ter that gel o' youm fer worlds, Maude, may 'Im wot's down under strike me if I lie . . ."

Granny whipped round, suddenly startlingly agile. "Anita? Wheer are yer gel, wheer *are* yer . . ."

A voice trilled from overhead, thin with distance, full of frost and stars. A blue glow moved across the dark quarter of the sky, a wild shape jerked in front of the moon.

Granny Thompson raised her stick. "Come *down*, yer little varmint . . . y'ent licensed, y'ent done yer *solo* . . ."

"Gran, it's wonderful. I'll fly to Mars . . ."

"COME ON DOWN . . ."

"I'll dance on Saturn's rings . . ."

"WILL YER LISTEN WHEN I TELLS YER . . ."

Aggie felt unaccustomed muscles begin to twitch. She started to laugh. "Let 'er *be*, Maude, wadn't you ever young . . ." Her voice floated up to Anita. "Goo an' see Orion . . . spin wi' the earth, an' see the Southern Cross . . ."

Granny Thompson was already bumping over the grass in an uneven and long-winded takeoff. Aggie held her sides. "Flaps, Maude, flaps . . ." And then, "Vee-two speed, *rotate* . . ."

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes!"

"I'll put my knuckles round about your 'ead in forty *seconds* . . ."

The voices of pursuer and pursued vanished in the tall night.

—KEITH ROBERTS

Every day a few more readers—we devoutly believe—are converted to science-fiction: but it is not every day that an established professional writer like Mr Trevor takes the plunge and we welcome him cordially.

THE CHICKEN SWITCH

by Elleston Trevor

The Air Force colonel handed me over to a young stone-faced captain and I was escorted along the first of the corridors where the warning notices read:

IF YOU DON'T HAVE SPECIAL PASS A6
YOU ARE ALREADY IN TROUBLE

I did have my special pass A6. I also had three other passes and a personally-signed note from the Chief-of-Project, because there'd been a hitch at one of the security checks and I was kept waiting around behind a glass panel like a strange bug strayed into a laboratory and pinned down for identification.

The young captain said: "Is this the first test you've observed, Mr Jasen?"

"No. The sixth."

"Then you've really seen things," he said.

"I've even believed them, Captain."

This was my ninth special assignment and it was almost finished now, so my nerves were edgy because it was always at this time when I began to wonder if that stuff I'd written was so original after all, and if I had already ruined the series before making the climax. Today, Monday, I was to observe the last of the tests, and a week from today I was to observe its results. I didn't like having to split a story this way, but I was in their hands.

They were cool, strong, dedicated hands. They were the kind of hands that worked at their best without a heart.

I was walked at a steady regulation pace by the young stone-faced captain through the maze of corridors. Along

their gleaming perspectives the many lamps winked above the many doors, most of them red, most of the panels reading a warning: *Chief of Test Laboratory. No Admittance. Monitor Room: Red Light Means No Entry. Psychomotor Analysis. Keep Out.* For a place looking so like a hospital it didn't look so hospitable, but after five weeks of observing sessions I was becoming used to the rarefied atmosphere of these buildings.

It had been like this at the other places, at the Aero-Medical Establishment, at the Research and Development Centre, at the Air Force Missile Flight-Plan Headquarters. The staffs and crews seemed like ordinary men; it was just like being among normal people; but with one difference. They were men of science, and they admitted of nothing that was even point-one degree non-scientific. If it had been otherwise, perhaps the human guinea-pigs in their care would have been less safe from the stresses they were undergoing.

I had seen the teams of guinea-pigs—all of them young, fit, cheerful men—at their weightless training in the big zero-gravity centrifuge at Matson Base, and observed their reaction to the echoless anechoic chambers and the claustrophobic booths; I had watched them pulling their bodies out of the hideous spins and gyrations of the multiple-axis space test inertia facility apparatus for Project Mercury, and seen them taking 20 G's with their faces in the television screen flattened and agonised. I had watched their willing, almost masochistic-seeming subjection to black-out, grey-out, red-out as the blood was drained by centrifugal force from their brain or driven back into it by the pressure of these machines that were devised by man for the testing of his own kind.

The young captain was right: I had really seen things. There was only this week's mission left. Up to this time, Monday noon, I hadn't given very much thought to it. I didn't at this minute, understand. With the confidence of those who do not understand, I was already shaping out the story in my head.

On this fine June morning of Monday I am fifty feet below ground-level in the hermetically-sealed super-beehive

known blandly as the Aero-Medical Psychological Stress Research Centre for the Man-High Project III. I have come here to meet one man. It may be that within the year he will become one of the three most important human beings ever to have been born upon this earth; for if plans go right, he and his team of two astronauts will be leaving us. His name is Charles J. Loomis.

"We're a little behind schedule, Mr Jasen."

The tones of the stone-faced young captain came edging against the clack of the typewriter keys in my head.

"Sure. I was held up a long time at one of the security-checks and—"

"We'll go right on into the test room, and you can take your time looking around after the send-off. I'll see that you're given a breakdown on his briefing procedure. They finished briefing him a half-hour ago."

"Fair enough, Captain."

Already, 'he' was so important here that his name had become unnecessary. The day—maybe the year—was his.

My nerves tightened another degree. What did this man look like? What would he say? Anything? As the nursed, groomed, peak-trained leader of this crack astronaut team who were to lead mankind from the site of its own birth into an unknown element, had Loomis forgotten how to talk to ordinary mortals, already?

The test room was high, circular, clinical, calm.

"Major Loomis, this is Mr Robert A. Jasen of Associated Eastern."

No, Loomis hadn't forgotten his mortal touch.

"Nice to have you here, Mr Jasen."

"Major, I'm privileged."

He looked like other men, with a young pink-skinned face and level eyes and a crew-cut and sometimes a faint clean smile. His clothes were strange, of course. He was already helped into them by three quiet men in laboratory-coats. They were dedicated to their work, easing and soothing with deft calm-fingered hands as they dressed him in the aluminium-skin suit, strapping the release-buckles, pulling the laces not too tight, not too loose, plugging in the psychomotor-relay leads and snapping home the junction-

sets, working on him with the confidence of busy tailors while he answered my few questions.

Our voices sounded strange, hardly echoing in the high cylindrical room where the capsule reared; the words seemed to float into the air and stop, to be lost like pricked bubbles.

"No, this is the fifteenth time I've been sealed into the capsule. Each time a little longer, to get me used to the prolonged isolation and make me feel it's my home . . . Yes, this is the actual nose-cone they'll fit to the Atlas-D when we make the big shoot, and it gives me a kind of homely feeling. I wouldn't be keen to go out there in anything strange."

The capsule loomed behind him, cold-looking, a tomb, a tower. Home.

The space-doctor had come in quietly and Loomis just smiled to him and went on answering my queries.

"Oh yes, I feel very good inside there, nothing much to bother me except the instrument panel . . . That's right, this trip is for seven days. It's about the time it's going to take to hit the moon and bounce all the way back . . . No, the last trip I did was only four days. This time it's going to be the final three that will really test me."

His occasional smile was faint but confident and he looked at me right in the eyes, sizing me up and getting my wave-length, just as I was getting his. It surprised me to have so much of his attention; maybe it was because I was one of the last people he would see for a week, for seven days and seven nights in the confines of that metal tomb.

"And your isolation is going to be complete, Major?"

"Complete." For an instant his eyes changed and the smile went out and left a smooth pink well-shaved face with eyes in it that had no more life than two holes in a mask. He looked, for these few seconds, as inhuman as the rearing nose-cone capsule behind him. It was waiting for him, half-blue, half-white, girdled with a checker-painted clamping band of steel, its smooth surface broken only by the hatch-levers and the round vision-panel the size of a man's head.

"What will occupy your time, in there?"

"Just routine stuff. Checking the instruments and reporting their readings, sending out technical data: time since simulated blast-off, time remaining until retro-firing at the end of the return flight, oxygen content of normal and safety tanks, hydrogen peroxide content of capsule boost storage, water-vapour content of the pressure-suit and nose-cone, concentration of carbon-dioxide—degree of flight parabola—extent of gyroscopic fluctuation if any—" he found his faint grin again. "This must be very boring for you, Mr Jasen."

"Not really. Not really. And er—you'll be tuned-in to the radio acknowledgments of your reports?"

"Not this trip, no. The isolation has to be one hundred per cent complete. We assume that by some kind of breakdown we can't receive from base on the earth; but I just go on sending, hoping it gets through. It gives me something to do in there."

The space-doctor was checking his eyes briefly, testing the tightness of the straps and laces, moving around him like a technician checking a machine, a robot.

"But it won't use up all of your waking-time," I said, feeling a nuisance to them all, "this reading of the reports. What about the rest of all those hours and days?"

"Well, I move around a little, take a look through the vision-panel as if it weren't dead-screened, and maybe think about how the green fields look and what a good steak mirabelle would taste like instead of my vitamin-pack, and what movie I'd go see if I were in town." He must have caught the look in my eye a minute ago, because he said, "I'm still human, you know."

"Super-human, Major, I'd say. But you can't read a book in there, a magazine—there's no phonograph in there with you?"

"All I have in there with me is my brain. And my gimmick."

They were lifting the big space-helmet.

"What gimmick is that?"

"Maybe I'll tell you, Mr Jasen, a week from now. Save it for our next date, noon Monday."

They lowered the white studded cylinder over his head and it came to rest on the shoulder-cushions. For five minutes they connected up the intricate straps and electrical leads, rechecking everything they did until it was right and they were happy.

I reached down for one of the skin-tight wired gloves and shook it gently, almost surprised in an eerie way to feel a hand inside it.

"Good luck, Major Loomis!" I mouthed at the face-panel for him to lip-read; and the big white helmet nodded, like a human head. Then they helped him inside the capsule and took ten minutes to seal up the hatch and connect the metering-leads to the psychomotor analysis relay.

The young captain beside me said: "Take a look at him through the panel, sir, if you want. We have just two minutes more to go."

The panel was heavily smoked against the risk of sudden intense glare from spatial radiance that might be encountered on the actual flight, and my eyes took a few seconds to accommodate. Then I saw that though the nose-cone was big, the cabin was just a cramping prison-cell inside the surrounding equipment sections. There was a bed made of thick foam rubber on a skeleton frame and the man was already lying prone on it, face up, the helmet cupped by the special trough so that his head would be level with his heart during the 40-G blast-off acceleration stress.

He looked half-human now and half-machine, the toy victim of a child's sadistic play.

"We have one minute, Mr Jasen."

I stepped back and an operator flipped a switch. Very slowly the vision-panel filled with black as the opaque dead-screen slid upwards. The man was gone from our sight.

The long thin blade of the wall-clock trailed in silence, slicing the seconds until it reached the top and it was noon, Monday.

The test director spoke into a microphone.

"All set, Major Loomis?"

The reply was intoned metallically from a speaker-unit

in the control panel. "All set." Not really like a human voice but like an accidental series of sounds from moving machinery.

"We're disconnecting you, sir."

"Check."

An operator cut the switch and pulled out the lead and there was silence in the room, just as there must now be silence inside that sealed and severed capsule where a man had—the last time I'd looked—been lying prone. An amber light began winking on the panel, measuring the count-down. I was mesmerised by it and couldn't look away. The sudden weird tone of a radio-signal note cut into the silence and held steady, and the light flicked out as gently as death would close an eye. These were the few simple rites performed in the presence of the tomb. Everybody began moving to the door and I followed them, wanting to turn and look back and say to them: 'But we can't just leave him in there like that!' What, I wondered, would they have imagined I could possibly mean?

The last question I asked the young captain as we took the elevator to the security release-checks was:

"Did you ever go inside that capsule?"

"Once I did, yes. I held on three hours before I had to flip the chicken-switch and tell them to get me out. I don't aim to try it again."

"Can Major Loomis use the switch, if he wants?"

"Sure. I guess he won't do that, though. He has a very special kind of mind and he's peak-trained now. We all hope he'll make out on this test, because it means a lot to the programme. If he can take seven days in there he can do it again on the date."

He passed me through the checks and I was outside in the big world with the ground under my feet. But the sunshine had lost its warmth and the air of this clear June day felt cold.

* * * *

Monday night was normal but Tuesday less easy for me. I'd thought about him sometimes during the day and now with my head on the pillow (level with my heart) I couldn't

sleep, so I made Dorothy go on talking longer than usual, until her soft voice got so drowsy I didn't persist; and she slept; and so, after hours, did I.

The third day, Wednesday, I skipped lunch because the idea of food wasn't tempting, but false hunger began in the afternoon and I found myself in Mario's around four o'clock with some roast beef on rye, alone in a sea of empty tables and explaining there had been a deadline conference at mid-day.

This Wednesday night I took a couple of Dreamers but they didn't reach me and Dorothy talked for half an hour about Willa and Willa's kids and Willa's vacation in Watkins Glen—if I wanted to make Dorothy talk and keep on talking (which ordinarily I didn't) I had only to start her off on the subject of Willa, whom she loved and hated and admired and scorned and had immersed herself in ever since they both left high school. But even Willa had limits.

"You drank too much coffee tonight, Jay," Dorothy told me through the gloom of our room.

"Guess I did, honey. You just turn over now, and sweet dreams."

"I'll see you don't take too much coffee tomorrow, Jay. It's bad for you. I wish you could get to like decaffeinated. Willa never lets David drink so much coffee, nights—she said she read somewhere—"

"She's right, and so are you, too. You go to sleep now, honey."

Because I didn't want to talk any more. I just wanted to lie there in the dark and think about him and try working him out of my system. Face it and forget it; face the simple idea of his being still in there after two whole nights and two days (when the stone-faced young captain had flipped the chicken-switch after just three hours). Face the memory of the way that one small panel had filled slowly with black water, blotting him out of our sight, of the way the operator had cut the sound-switch and then pulled the wire clear, so finally, so cruelly. Face what the space-doctor had told me at Matson Base when I'd been observing the claustrophobic booth tests:

"The technical boys have set up their side pretty well

and they say they're ready to go, with the proven Atlas-D. There's only the human factor now and we're still a little behind on that, because it's very much more critical and sensitive, naturally. It's the only imponderable factor we have to deal with right now, and it exists because the astronauts know there's going to be another imponderable factor—out there. Do what we will, nobody here can tell them exactly what they will have to meet with in the cosmos. The problem exists also on account of another thing: the racial memory. It isn't simply that a human being is going a little higher in the sky. He's going into a new element, and that hasn't happened, you know, since the first amphibious reptile crawled out of the primeval slime a few billion years ago and began its million-year programme for learning to breathe a new element—air. We are doing the same thing now, but a good deal faster. Sixty years ago we couldn't get off the ground except by jumping, and now we're preparing to leave the planet.

"Do what we will in selecting the right personality-types for this task, and no matter how balanced a mind we have inside that space-helmet, there is something right down there at the root of the subconscious that knows the score, and fears it, and opposes the very idea of this enormous change we are forcing on it. The most serious psychological barrier against our work is what we term the break-off effect that has to be dealt with by the astronaut. It's almost exactly comparable to the subconscious trauma undergone by the infant at the moment of its birth—and the reason why it cries, and knows fear for the first time: fear of the unknown. In these claustrophobic booths we have had a grown man scream, for that same basic reason: he was losing touch with his mother: his mother-earth. In his mind he was out there in space, isolated. Isolation is fearful for a herding animal such as man. In these booths, even though the subject knows he has a team working along with him right outside, even though he knows he can pull the switch and regain the norm for himself, he can easily lose his sense of time and orientation. Everything becomes remote and unreal; he knows he is becoming lost.

"When you were a child," the space-doctor said to me,

"you must have gotten lost once or twice. We all of us did. And you remember how you felt. Well, it's like that, for these boys, right now."

I hit the pillow to bunch it up and turned over for the twentieth time, and tried to sleep, and couldn't sleep, and tried to face it, and couldn't face it without fear creeping across my mind as slowly as that dead-screen across the panel of the capsule, black water rising.

I must have slept a couple of hours, maybe even longer, but the fourth night—Thursday—was really bad and the next morning I was like a rag doll and Dorothy said I should go see Doc Johnson. This scared me, because you only see doctors when you get sick.

"It's the assignment," I said. "I'm a little jumpy, that's all."

She took this seriously, as if I'd made the assignment an excuse for something else and she had to pretend she believed it. Everything was turning upside down now, even in waking hours. For the first time I had been given an assignment that didn't remain an exercise in observation and comment . . . I was involved. For more and more of my working-day when I was helping the office tie up arrangements for the next job, and for almost all of the night hours, I was now under the influence of one man. Loomis. It was as if I were in there with him, yet not with him but alone, in his place. Becoming lost.

We have had a grown man scream.

I thought of telling my chief he could call in somebody else to finish this story—I had nine-tenths of the facts already down in type and there would be only those few minutes next Monday talking to *him* when they got him out of the capsule and Jack Faybright could easily fit this date in for me (I argued pretty well, convincing myself and my chief)—I'd helped Faybright on the Cuban story and he owed me his time—besides which, lately I hadn't been feeling too chipper, and—

So it had gone this far: I was even thinking of falling down on the assignment. My ninth. I needed help.

Whenever I needed help, there was only one person.

"Honey," I told her, "it really is the assignment that's acting up on me."

We'd been to a movie and I'd asked to come out before it was through because there'd been people packed in on both sides of us and the house was full and I'd felt choked, strangled, shut off, shut in, lost. "We'll go find us a drink and I'll try telling you about this thing," I said to Dorothy.

"You go ahead and tell me, Jay. But no drink."

She was wise, wise, and I resented it but obeyed.

"Well they've put this boy into the capsule and they've sealed him up, and it's for seven days—a whole week in there without—"

"You told me, Jay, you told me," she said as we walked home in the light cool summer rain with her nervous hand in the crook of my arm, "You told me in your sleep. But it isn't important to you, don't you see? It's only important to him."

She went on talking like this, gently as if I were a child, firmly because I must learn of life through the things she said; and I knew it was the intuition of all her kind—woman and mate and mother—that let her see that this was what I had become again: a child.

When you were a child, you must have gotten lost once or twice. We all of us did. And you remember how you felt.

So that she knew even more than I had realized for myself, until this moment of succour: that I was losing my own identity, in Loomis.

She talked to me and I listened, hungry for every word; but strangely she failed, because in the very act of her telling me what was happening to me she told me also that nothing could be done. And I thought fearfully: if the mother in my wife cannot save the child in her husband, what will happen when these men leave their earth and become lost? They will be born not sons, but orphans.

She talked but could tell me nothing, and I heard her voice already as from a distance.

When we reached the apartment she suggested we take the car and drive a little, and I agreed to this; but I

couldn't climb into it; I could open the door but not go inside. Inside, it looked so small, and its seats were made of foam rubber and had a skeleton frame. So I said I was too tired for driving and she didn't try to persuade me, but instead called up Doc Johnson.

He came round and had a meal with us that evening. He told me it was my ninth special assignment and I hadn't taken a vacation for six months and I needed sleep and time to regain the nervous resources I had called upon too heavily all this time—but these pills would fix the sleep and I must co-operate and have Dorothy read to me aloud; a child's story-book was best, something so simple that my mind could get a grip on it and forget the assignment for a few days.

I took the pills and she read to me and I fell into the weird unearthly void of a sleep whose dream was that I was not sleeping; it was a nightmare of denial. This was the fifth night and when I had endured it there came the dawn of Saturday and I knew it was too late now; I had passed the point of no-return, and the fine-drawn umbilical cord between known and unknown worlds had snapped.

I was shouting at everybody just to make them hear my voice and kept touching people so they could feel my hand and know me to be there—had a bad fight with Dorothy, the first in years—caught the look on my face, on my own face in the mirror when I was shouting at her and pressing against her shoulders to make her know what I was saying and make her know I meant it, every word—

"I don't need you! I don't need you and I don't need anybody, don't you see that? Need is a feeble thing and a man can go down under it like a cripple with straws for crutches—are you listening to me? There isn't anything I have to go back for! There isn't anybody or anything I need any more!"

I found myself slumped in a chair, cold and drained and silent, and master of myself—master of whatever 'self' had now become. Because it was true: there was now no need of need. If man had elected to leave the world where his life once was, he must take his life with him and leave no part of it behind; only thus could he survive.

They were crazy, not to understand. I began shouting to them again when they neared me and I was spun into the whirling rage of the parabola, over and over, and that was my face in the mirror because now I was alone and the great cord had snapped so this was the only face left in the universe—yet it seemed distorted, sick-white, sweating, its mouth the dark hole of the end of a trumpet sounding the doom of whatever shred of a soul still fluttered and strove behind the mask of this dreadful self to make itself known again and be found again. And sanity came back in a sweet cool flow ; sanity and fear :

"What did I say, honey—what did I say just now? About need, about needing you! Oh, help me if you can—I don't know what I said just now—" and my hands tried to move towards her but touched nothing as she stared at me, to float away and become the shut flat panel of the door.

Sunday I was better. Doc Johnson had been to give me shots and I was calmer and less worried by the words I'd heard Dorothy saying to her mother . . . "I don't think I'm safe with him any more." Now she had left the apartment and there was a man who was big but very quiet as if his whole life he'd been used to calming people who were a little jumpy about things. They said he was from the office to help me tie up my schedule for the next assignment ; and this made me feel much better, because it would be my tenth assignment and that made me almost a veteran, a top man with Associated Eastern. He was in the apartment all the time and even slept there in the guest-room ; and Doc Johnson showed him how to give me the shots and the stuff I had to take every two hours.

If there was ever a Sunday night on that date in June of that year I did not know it, because I can remember only Monday. I was feeling pretty good and people came to talk to me—I even saw my loved Dorothy who smiled to me with the scared smile of a child who is asked to trust what it knows to be untrustable. I said her name but she went away, telling me she would come back soon.

There was only one relapse ; it was when they left me and I was alone in the room, my isolation complete for a few minutes—and in those few minutes I was fighting it

out with the telephone, strangling the thing with my hands while my own voice circled around my head in the darkening void:

"Tell him to flip the chicken-switch, you hear me? I'm not taking this one minute more, you get that? I'm quitting! I need people and I have to get back now or I never will. You just listen to me! You get him out of there or by God I'll smash that whole machine with my own bare hands—"

The door came open and the big man wrenched the broken pieces of the telephone out of my fingers and held me with an ease that surprised me; there was a gentleness in his strength that I trusted, so I let him give me a shot and after a very long time I looked up at him from the chair and said: "What happened, son?"

"Nothing much happened, Mr Jasen. You're okay. But we have a date. Today is Monday and we have to go now."

"That's right," I told him. "We have to be there by noon. We'd better be going."

When we reached the street the big hired sedan was waiting at the kerb, and I climbed in with only a slight snatch at the nerves. The company helped: Doc Johnson was coming along for the ride, he said; there was a friend of his who looked like a lawyer or maybe a medical man—he smiled to me most of the time and seemed to listen hard to all I said, as if he were making some kind of examination without the help of any trappings; and there was my friend from the office. I did a little talking, because the sound of my own voice was in a way reassuring.

"This is the end of my assignment," I told them.

"That's right, Mr Jasen. Monday."

"Worked out alright, didn't it?"

"Worked out just fine."

"What do you say, Doc?" I asked Doc Johnson.

"Concentrate on the assignment, Robert, is what I say. Get the story finished, is the best medicine for any news-man."

"Hell, I don't need medicine!"

"We all do, sometimes. You've got this job into your system and now all we have to do is get it out again. Nothing bad in that."

The big sedan rode like a cloud through the highway towards Monday noon.

* * * *

There was no delay at the three security checks and the others came through with me: Doc Johnson and his intuitive-looking friend and the big man from my office. The young stone-faced captain had three of his men along with him as our escort; they were all rather tough-looking. I thought, for a scientific research centre. Then I thought, with Doc and his friend and the boy from my office all being strangers here, the Air Force captain wasn't taking any chances.

We walked in a bunch along the clinically-clean perspectives of the corridors.

IF YOU DON'T HAVE SPECIAL PASS A6 YOU ARE ALREADY IN TROUBLE

I didn't imagine we were in any kind of trouble.

One of our bunch was trying to walk right on in front, hurrying for the test room as if this date were vitally urgent.

"There's no rush, Mr Jasen. We'll be on time."

"I wasn't rushing, Captain."

The lamps glowed red above the closed doors where the men worked on the guinea-pig-men.

The door of the test room was already open because the space-doctor and test director and half a dozen technicians and operators were arriving just about the same time, so we stood around to let them all go shuffling inside the tall cool memory-shaking room where the nose-cone capsule towered like a twenty-first-century bomb. Sweat was creeping down my sides under my shirt.

Then we went inside the room. Nobody spoke. The blade of the wall-clock quietly carved the air. Two operators were connecting some leads to the control panel. Noon, a man-made abstract thing, would be here with us in two more minutes, from nowhere, from everywhere. I stood in silence, in great need of noon.

"We're ready, sir."

The test director nodded. "We'll do it on the clock."

The man clicked a switch down and the thin high-toned radio signal began, its needle lancing at the ears. The big half-blue half-white capsule reared above us, girdled with the checker-painted band. The vision panel was still black, dead-screened. The hatch-release levers looked immovable.

What, I thought through the needling nerve-note of the radio signal, happens to a man in seven days and seven nights, alone in there?

The amber light was suddenly winking on the control panel, measuring the count-down, and someone was moving his lips, intoning quietly, "*Ten—nine—eight—*"

Noon was coming and in a few seconds now I would be free and the world would be mine again to live in. The relief seemed to begin in my feet and flow upwards to circle in my solar plexus.

"—*Seven—six—five—*"

Everything was coming all right again and I felt the world was safe, its future assured in the hands of men like Loomis with his special kind of mind and his special kind of courage.

"—*Four—three—two—*"

Loomis, pilot of a looming missile, a good name for an astronaut, for the first of men to reach for the new element and tame it to obey his will and support his life and the life of the many who would be born of his seed, the cosmic children of Loomis.

"—*One.*"

Noon.

"Stand by."

The radio signal cut out, ceding to silence. The amber light went dark but over the hatch of the capsule a lamp glowed a steady green. Pressure was still hissing along the system. The dead-screen was sliding down across the vision panel.

"Release-pressure zero, sir. Air-balance negative. Equalisers running. Ready."

"Tell him."

A man spoke into the mike. "Major Loomis. We are opening up."

Two men moved towards the capsule and drew at the

levers, their shadows playing across the hatch-door. The levers swung away and the door came open and held steady at right-angles. The men stood back.

"Wait now. Just let him come out when he wants."

I thought: I am coming. I am free.

We stood in a group. We waited.

After a full minute there was movement from inside the capsule and a shadow hit the door and then Loomis came out.

Doc Johnson had a hand on my arm. "Steady up," he said.

"I'm fine," I said. Something like a bubble of laughter burst secretly in my throat.

Loomis stepped clumsily over the hatch-jamb, his legs feeble, the big space-helmet grazing the side of the hatch. Men stood ready to help him but he was all right. He stood almost erect in the midst of us and the three technicians began working at the straps and buckles, busy as tailors.

When they got the helmet off him we could look at his face. It was pale but he gave his faint smile as he looked around. "Place hasn't changed," he said.

Somebody touched my arm and said we must go on out now. I could talk to Loomis in an hour. They escorted us out of the test room and I was given a chair and I sat feeling at peace and filled with admiration for Loomis and men like him.

When they had debriefed him and made medical checks for the records he came in and I got out of the chair. He wanted to keep on his feet because, he said, "I was a long time sitting down in there on my hams."

He looked fit but tired, like a football-player happy but jaded by a long hard game.

"Well," I said, "you made it, Major."

"Guess I did. Wasn't so bad, though."

"You have a reputation around here as a man with a special kind of mind."

"I'd say that's very much an exaggeration."

"One thing I'd like to ask you, Major. You told me last Monday you had some kind of gimmick that you use in

there, to help you take it. You said you'd tell me what that gimmick is."

"Oh, sure."

"It's nothing private, or personal?"

"But no, Mr Jasen."

It surprised me that he even remembered my name, the name of a stranger, almost. My face too, because he had to relate the name with the face, to know who I was.

"For what it's worth," he said, "anybody can try it. I don't think it works for my team, but it works for me." His grey eyes that had looked at me and into me so steadily last Monday were casual now. "It's just this way: when I'm in there and the feeling starts in me that I'm losing emotional equilibrium and orientation, and I get the urge to flip that chicken-switch, I just project my thoughts outside the capsule—I imagine I'm out in the ordinary world doing normal things, seeing a movie, walking on the street—you know?"

"A projection of the mind?"

"Nothing crackpot, you understand—I mean, in this place we don't believe in things like telepathy or—"

"Why no, I realise that."

"Anyway that's all I do—kind of put the burden on someone else."

I said: "On someone else. You mean one particular person?"

"That's right. Nobody in this place, because I know they're all working here and not seeing a movie or anything. Somebody whose face I've taken a good look at before I go into the capsule, so I can remember him easily." He gave his faint smile. "A stranger is best. Someone like you."

—ELLESTON TREVOR

SUSAN

by Alistair Bevan

Summer and winter the chemistry lab had a smell all its own, a sharp half-sweet nuance like the scent of dust magnified many times. It came from the storage shelves to the left of the door where bottles of chemicals stood in rows on shelves of dark orange wood. Here were sulphates and thiosulphates, oxides and hydroxides, phosphorus coiled like Devil's spaghetti in its thick oil, shining miniature slagheaps of iodine. There were other things too, a microscope on loan from Biology next door, a balance, its brasswork shining butter-yellow from its protective case; and a crystal of CuSO_4 , meridian bright in its tall vat. The jar in which the crystal hung stood on top of the highest shelf and seemed in itself to be a focus of light; reflections burned deep inside it like elongated turquoise suns.

Susan moved her unusual eyes from the shelves of chemicals, back to Mrs. Williams. The science mistress droned on softly, voice pitched just loud enough to carry to the farthest corners of the lab. From time to time chalk rasped on the board, the lines of symbols grew, white dust fell silently to thicken the drifts along the bottom of the varnished frame. This was the last period of the day and the lights were burning, pooling the floor with yellow, defining the edges of the benches with long waxy reflections, striking spindle-shaped gleams from the rims of beakers and flasks. Through the windows the sky was deepening toward four o'clock blue. Little noises came from the thirty girls: the rasp of a stool leg, the scuff of a foot, an occasional cough. The class was very slightly restless. Autumn term would finish in just under a fortnight; eight whole schooldays and a bit before breaking-up and all the concert-making, report-sealing, desk-tidying excitement still to come. Christmas was already in the air.

The benches ran round three sides of the lab. To the right were more shelves with masses of glassware, test-

tubes, gas jars, troughs, great seldom-used retorts. In the corner behind was the fume cupboard, bulky and forbidding with its tall newel posts, in the middle of the room the dais and the long blackboards. Susan sat halfway down the centre bench, elbows resting on the dark wood, knees together, steepled fingers just touching her top lip. She let her eyes wander again from the face of the mistress to the batwing burner on the bench in front of her. The little flame danced in a deepening web of shadow, its base invisible, its yellow horns quivering and ducking and never quite repeating the same shape twice. Its other less-used name was butterfly burner and like the Olympic torch it was a symbol, lit at the beginning of a lesson, never extinguished until the end. The flame hovered at the tip of the slim pipe like the bleeder of a tiny furnace where ideas, perhaps, were burned.

Mrs. Williams raised her chin slightly, questioningly. "And the composition of hydrochloric acid, someone? Quickly now." Her glance travelled across the rows of faces, came inevitably to Susan. "Yes, Susan?" she asked.

The girl lowered her hands to her lap gently and straightened her back. If a voice can be said to have colour, Susan's voice was amber like her hair. "Thank you, Susan" said Mrs. Williams. "Yes." She paused, right elbow cupped in left hand, finger touching her throat. She was still for a moment, looking at nothing. Then the duster fizzed softly on the blackboard, the chalk scraped again. The lesson continued.

Ten to four, and the class starting to make their notes. Susan wrote methodically, glancing up from time to time to verify a formula that was already in her mind. As she finished the last line the bell shrilled in the corridor.

Nibs continued to scratch for another half minute; Mrs. Williams rart a very firm class. Then the mistress nodded briefly; exercise books scurried into satchels, buckles snapped shut, fountain pens were closed and rammed back into blazer pockets. There was the sort of straining silence that only comes between last bell and dismissal. Mrs. Williams eagled at the girls, compressed her lips. Then she turned and scanned the board with a vaguely resentful

air, as if the end of classes had taken her completely by surprise. The corners of Susan's mouth turned upward the smallest fraction. This was all part of the ritual.

"Very well" said Mrs. Williams. "Stand."

A thunder of obedience.

"Stools."

The stools were thrust hastily beneath the benches.

"Dismiss" said Mrs. Williams. "Quietly now."

The class scuttered down the corridor. Susan watched them go. Through the open door came the hurrying, locker-slamming sound of the big school finishing for the day. The batwing flame vanished with a pop.

Mrs. Williams looked up sharply. "Well, Susan? Haven't we got a home?"

Susan swung her crammed satchel onto her shoulder. "I'm sorry Mrs. Williams. I was dreaming."

Mrs. Williams smiled. The smile looked a little strained. "Time enough for that after next June."

"Yes, Mrs. Williams. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Susan."

The mistress stood in the doorway, books under her arm, hand on the lightswitches. She watched Susan walk away. She stayed still after the tall girl had turned the corner and was out of sight. Then a scuffle of second formers shot from somewhere, swirled momentarily round her skirt. Mrs. Williams jerked to automatic attention. "You. You, there. Yes, all of you. Come here . . ." She turned off the switches, and left the classroom to the twilight.

Susan washed her hands and face in the end sink of the first floor cloakroom, pulled a fresh loop of towel out of the dispenser. She dried herself slowly, burying her face in the towel to catch the clean, linen-smell of it that went so naturally with the scents of carbolic soap and steam. Cat-cleanliness was part of Susan's particular mystery. She had been the same as a first former although first formers are notoriously a fusty, inky-pawed crew. On one occasion the school captain of the time, catching a small girl at the unheard-of rite of washing during break, had taken her persistence for insolence and the whole

idea for cheek and attempted to expel her. But a child who *buzzes* her displeasure like something electric, until your hand tingles and you have to let go, is something too far outside normal experience to cope with. And the child would keep staring with those lilac eyes, and the whole incident had unnerved the prefect so badly she never got round to reporting it . . .

Susan crossed to the mirror, flicked her corn-coloured hair more or less into place, picked up her satchel again and headed for 5Q formroom, deserted now and dark. She turned on one light and packed her books for evening study, checking the subjects against the timetable pinned inside the desk lid. Then she walked back down the corridor toward the stairs.

Miss Hutton sat at her desk in the lower Sixth form-room and watched the girl pass the half-open door. Then she called softly, knowing she would hear.

"Susan?"

Susan slowed automatically and walked back to the room.

"Yes, Madam?"

Miss Hutton moistened her lip very slightly with her tongue and her fingers twined in each other restlessly. For a moment she looked undecided. She said "You are rather late, aren't you?"

"Yes, Miss Hutton. I was packing my books."

Miss Hutton frowned and looked away from Susan's face and then back quickly as if she had come to a decision. She said "What time does your bus leave?"

"Four twenty-five, Madam."

Miss Hutton set her jaw. "Susan, do you think you could spare me a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course."

"Come in" said Miss Hutton. "Close the door. Sit anywhere . . . Don't worry, you are not in trouble."

Susan smiled.

She took a seat in front of the mistress, eased her long legs a little awkwardly under the desk. She slid the satchel from her shoulder and waited with her eyes on

Miss Hutton's face. The school was very quiet now, nearly all the pupils gone.

Miss Hutton rose, folded her arms, walked quickly across the dais to the window, looked down into the corner of the quad. She said "Over the years I have come to have a special feeling about the sound the school makes as it empties. To me it seems that the building becomes a great conduit full of very fresh clear water; and the footsteps and the voices tinkle and splash along the corridors and down stairs until the last one is gone. Do you understand me, Susan?"

"Yes, Madam."

Miss Hutton smiled awkwardly, fingered her unpainted lip. In class she was very much of a martinet but there was little to suggest that now. She was a small, neat, elderly woman, just a little bowed, and tiredness had sagged down the corners of her mouth and made fine lines round her eyes. She walked back to her desk, stood leaning her hands on its polished surface and looking down at Susan. She said "As you know, Susan, I am retiring at the end of the present term. I had hoped to continue to the end of the school year in July but various considerations, among them my health, prompted an earlier decision. So in a fortnight's time I shall be gone. School life being what it is, one day tends to slip very rapidly into the next, more particularly as one becomes older." She cleared her throat. "This may very possibly be the last opportunity I have to talk to you like this, privately. And I want very particularly to ask you a question."

"Yes, Madam." There was no interrogation in Susan's voice. She spoke calmly, as if she had always known this conversation would take place and had already guessed its outcome.

Miss Hutton leaned forward a little. She inhaled slowly and held the breath, let it go again with a tiny sound. Her eyes were intent on the girl's face. "Susan," she said gently, "Who are you?"

A pause. Then, slowly, "I'm sorry, Madam. I don't know what you mean."

Miss Hutton shook her head slightly. She continued to

watch Susan and the girl looked back calmly. They both remembered something that had happened just a week ago.

A classroom. Pale sunlight slanting across the desks, the tall windows bright with winter sky. Form 5Q had been reading *Romeo and Juliet*. Miss Hutton had cast round for a Juliet and her eyes had stopped on Susan and she had asked her to speak the part. And when they had come to the impossible scene where Juliet imagines waking inside a tomb thirty prone-to-giggle fifth formers had been held by words that for the first time seemed to have a great singing meaning. In the quietness Miss Hutton had paced up between the desks and taken Susan's neglected book and walked back to the front of the form. Susan carried on for half a dozen lines then slowed and stopped, and the enchantment was broken. "I'm sorry, Madam," Susan said. "I can't remember any more."

Miss Hutton looked down at the book in her hand and frowned. "Susan, do you have this play by heart?"

"No, Madam. Only a few lines here and there. We did some of it in the lower school."

Someone whispered briefly and Miss Hutton silenced the offender with a look. She opened her mouth to speak, thought better of it and nodded briskly as if the subject was closed. Then she had returned the book to Susan, still open, and Susan looked at it as it lay on the desk and at the top of the page were the words 'Persons Represented' . . .

Miss Hutton laughed, not unmusically. She said "You slipped up there, Susan. The best of us do occasionally." She became intent again. "You do have that play by heart, don't you?"

"Yes, Madam."

"And everything else you ever read for me?"

"Yes, Madam."

Miss Hutton nodded. "Yes, I know that. Everything, at one reading. But you're clever, my dear. You veil your mind, as you veil those eyes of yours . . . I don't know how you do it but that is what you do . . . Why, Susan? Why? I ask you again, who are you? *Or what* . . ."

Silence. Then Susan said evenly "I have a very retentive mind, Miss Hutton."

The teacher turned away abruptly and seemed to stare at the blackboard. Then she sat down in her chair, rested her elbows on the desk, laid her chin on her laced fingers. She said slowly "Susan, when I started to teach, many years ago, I had certain ideals. I do not think I had any illusions, I realized that for each little success there would be many, many frustrations and failures and disappointments, but I had ideals. I don't think I altogether lost them. In fact I know I did not. Within my limitations I have been a good teacher . . . But now, right at the end, I cannot help a certain feeling of . . . unfulfilment. It seems that I am able to see nothing but the failures, all the children who showed promise who did not realize that promise for one reason or another. And of course for someone like myself who tries to teach from within the pupil rather than applying the arbitrary requirements of syllabus in a process of verbal tarring and feathering, there must be with each child the ultimate disappointment of seeing her, or him, pass beyond your reach into what is generally termed adult life. You are left to guess what sort of person your little half-made creature finally becomes." She smiled slightly. "In my younger days of course things were not quite so hectic. Classes were smaller; we were not fighting the Battle of the Bulge as we do today. All you small people had more room to spread and grow; schools were not manufactories in quite the same sense as they are now. Or perhaps I am already assuming the rosy glasses of the elderly. For I am old." The smile flicked off, then returned. "I know most of you think of me as already decrepit" said Miss Hutton. The stock line would have raised a giggle from any fifth former. This girl did not smile.

Miss Hutton picked up an ebony ruler from the desk and turned it slowly, watching the reflections run along its smooth darkness. She said "I have realized something about myself at last, Susan. I am a very selfish person."

Susan did not blink.

The mistress laid the ruler down. She said "In two

weeks' time, after our little concert and the customary speeches for end of term, there will be a presentation. I shall be given a reading lamp or a Life of Johnson, and I shall make a short parting address wishing you all luck in the years to come and hoping you have a Merry Christmas. There will be three cheers for Miss Hutton. I can hear them now, very penetrating and shrill with the school captain leading them. Then I shall leave."

"I have bought a little cottage, not very far from here. It has a garden, not large and rather wild at the moment. I hope to spend quite a lot of time working on it. I shall dig, and plant, and after a year or so I shall have quite an attractive display of flowers. I shall come back to the school of course for Speech Days. For a little while there will be faces amongst you that I know. The little new people may notice me and ask 'Who is that?' and somebody a little older and very scornful will say 'That's Miss Hutton, who used to teach English.' But that will pass, and afterwards I will be just another old lady for whom the monitors will have to find a seat. No-one will remember."

Susan reached up and pushed a strand of hair back from her eyes.

"I went to my cottage last weekend" said Miss Hutton. "I stood in what will be the living room, and looked round the bareness, and planned where I should place this and that piece of furniture. And an odd thought came to me. It seemed that this little room, so still and cold, had been waiting for me for over sixty years. Do you understand how I felt?"

Susan stirred slightly. She said "Yes Miss Hutton, I do."

Miss Hutton nodded to herself vaguely. "Of course. Now, Susan, for a senior member of staff to seek counsel of a fifteen year old pupil is an act that I consider gross, and that I can only describe as an obscene privilege. But of course you are not a normal child. In fact as we understand the term, you are not a child at all are you?"

Very quietly. "No, Madam."

A shadow seemed to touch the old woman's face. A

muscle twitched in her jaw. She said "Not a child . . . and there is something at the back of your eyes that should make me afraid. I don't know why it does not."

Susan said softly "How can I help you, Miss Hutton?"

The teacher made shapes in the air with her hands, as if symbols might be better than words to express what she wanted to say. "Susan, perhaps my need is very simple. I should have married. I should have liked children of my own; I could have watched them grow and ripen and marry perhaps, in their own time. But somehow I never got round to marriage. There was always too much to do at school. In a sense, although this will sound very stupid to you, you were all my children. And now you have gone into time, and I am left with my flowers and my little silent room. As I told you, I am selfish. These things should be enough. These and the knowledge that I did my best. But they are not."

Susan's eyes were lowered modestly. Her wrist was touching the wood of the desk; she wore a slim watch, and the desk top was acting as a sounding board for the tiny thing so that its ticking seemed to ring in the room.

"Susan," said Miss Hutton, and her voice whispered and creaked, "I remember you when you came to this school, a little smidgin of a thing, all plaits and eyes. Now you are taller than I. I've watched you grow, over the years, and I know, *I know*, that you have more understanding than I, and more compassion than any of us . . . I was tempted to say, than any of us poor humans. And yet by our standards you are a half-grown child." She shook her head again. "And like any child you are a die, a matrix. But the shape you will stamp out, when you are grown, is past my imagining."

The girl was silent. Her quietness had a penetrating quality; the grey walls of the room, the rows of empty desks seemed in themselves to be listening and waiting.

"I think," said the mistress, "that what I am asking you to do is to take the place of all my other vanished children. Be my child, Susan. Tell me what you intend to do with yourself. Will you be a doctor, a dancer? An artist perhaps, a scientist? Tell me and I shall be able to follow

you, in my mind at least. Perhaps I might even hear of you or see you again one day. By doing this, I think you would make up for all the rest."

Silence lengthened; the ticking of the watch became louder until it was the noise of a little frenzied machine clacking off irretrievable seconds. Then Susan raised her head. "I'm sorry," she said simply. "I don't know what I shall be. So I can't tell anyone, Miss Hutton. Not even you."

Miss Hutton stared at the desk and her hands clenched until the knuckles showed white with strain. The sound of the watch clattered in her mind and the little cottage room seemed suddenly to grow out of darkness, chilling her as if its very walls harboured an unearthly cold. Miss Hutton shuddered and gasped; then something seemed almost to shoulder past her into that room, something young and golden and intensely alive, something that brushed away fears and ghosts and oldness and snapped open windows to let in sunlight and warmth. Miss Hutton laughed uncertainly, seeing the little room before her with the vividness of hallucination. There was no darkness now; its windows were open and through them she could see June flowers, a brightness of grass, cumulus ships sailing the intense sky. This was a place to which she could come in dignity, and in peace. She could rest here, and she would not be alone . . .

Miss Hutton looked up and blinked. Susan was leaning over her and it seemed to the mistress that even while she watched a light was dying away from the girl's eyes. She stared fascinated while a lilac brightness snapped and glittered and ebbed; then Susan was only a gentle-faced blonde girl in a dark blue school uniform and blazer. On her shoulder, a satchel of books.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hutton," said Susan. "I must catch my bus now."

Miss Hutton blinked again and realized the fear was gone, replaced by an unassailable feeling of rightness, as if a question had indeed been asked and answered but not with words. She took a breath and when she spoke her voice was quite different; it had regained its old brisk-

ness. "Yes," she said. "On you go. I'm glad we had our little chat. And Susan . . ."

"Madam?"

"*Thank you,*" said Miss Hutton.

Susan watched her a moment longer. Then she did an impossible thing. She reached forward and gripped the old woman's shoulder briefly with one hand.

Miss Hutton sat at the desk for a full minute after Susan had gone. Then her hand moved up to the sleeve of her cardigan and touched it and it seemed a warmth came from the place and suffused through her body.

Susan paused in the locker rooms to retie her house sash; then she took her coat from the peg and shrugged herself into it. She tightened the belt, smoothed the collar, ran her finger round inside it to free her hair. She flicked her head, hefted the satchel and walked out to the bus queue as the vehicle ground to a halt outside the school gates. She boarded it and sat on her own, leaning back on the seat with her eyes closed. The chugging of the engine, the noise from the load of children, sounded faintly. She felt tired, as if for the moment she was drained of all energy. A Grammar School fourth former ogled at her and she grinned without opening her eyes; another, greatly daring, tweaked the end of her sash but she did not react. Her ears told her of the vehicle's progress; here the driver changed down for a corner, here he accelerated on a slope. She listened to the town being left behind. The bus halted four times and juddered away again. When it reached Susan's stop she climbed down and stood and watched the tail lights move round a bend of the road and out of sight. The engine sound faded away; a little wind came from somewhere, chilling with a promise of snow and ice. Susan started to walk.

A hundred yards or so along the main road she turned off into a lane. The estate where she lived was new and as yet there were no streetlights. In front and far off she could see the yellow rectangles of house windows and porches. She entered the darkest part of the road, moving slowly beneath the bare branches of trees.

Beneath the hedge, inside Harold Sanderson, a red angel

and a white fought for mastery. Harold panted; sweat started out on his face and slid down his cheeks, his hands gripped convulsively, the fingers crumbling twigs and earth. And the red angel conquered, and waved its sword and shouted an awful truth, and Harold growled and slid forward, small now only in stature. His fingers were crooked, wanting to squeeze and twist.

The tall girl walked unconcernedly, scuffing dead leaves with her shoes. Out on the main road headlights flashed; a beam of light flicked her hair for a second and the hair was yellow and soft. Harold shuddered and began to make a moaning noise like an animal. Another five steps, four, three, two, one. . . . He sprang, reaching with his claws.

The satchel, loaded solid with books, caught him squarely under the jaw. He fell back and another blow seemed to explode across his ear, sending him sprawling. He saw a great flash of light and when it was gone the angel had vanished. He rolled over, feeling wet earth beneath him, and his hands came up to protect his face. "No," muttered Harold. "No more. . . ."

Susan bent over him, close enough to see the alien thing that sprawled in his brain like a cancer. Her eyes shone and she wrenched at the thing with disgust; unwanted neural links swelled and popped like worms. 'THERE IS BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS,' raged Susan silently. 'WHY DIDN'T YOU COME TO ME BEFORE. . . .'

Harold sat up dazedly, unable to remember. "Sorry," he wheezed. "Must have fallen . . . sorry if I gave you a turn." He looked up blinking in the dark, only able to see her silhouette. His face was not quite the same. In the centre of his mind now was a little vacancy, harmless as a sunny meadow.

"That's all right," said Susan quietly. "Let me help." Her hand found his arm and half hoisted him to his feet.

He trotted beside her, chattering, till they reached the first of the houses. "Really obliged," said Harold, "very much obliged. I think I must have knocked my head when I went over. Might've laid there all night. Dark under them trees there, you could lay all night easy and not get

found. . . . I was a bit funny but I'm all right now, it's going off. Can't think what I was doing right out here, that I can't. I've heard of these lapses of memory. I reckon I had one of them. . . . No thanks I shall be fine, got a car down the lane see. . . . Can't think what I was doing, wandering about like that." He stopped at Susan's gate. "Thanks again miss, thanks very much indeed . . . goodnight miss, and thanks . . . yes. . . ."

Susan watched him go. "Be careful," she called softly. "It's very dark. Don't slip again." She waited until he was out of sight then she walked up the path to the house.

She hung her coat and satchel in the hall and walked through to the lounge. The curtains were drawn, a fire crackling in the hearth. In the corner the television set was working quietly. Melanie sat rather grumpily on the mat, feet apart, hands spread each side of her. "Susan," she complained, before her sister was halfway through the door, "I can't find my big animal book. And I wanted it tonight for Brownies. Do you know where it is?"

Susan thought for a moment and saw the book quite clearly, wedged down behind the back of the sideboard. She retrieved it and dropped it in Melanie's lap. "You always know where everything is," said the little girl. "I wish I did." She began to leaf through the book. "Anne Ryder's brother is in India and he wrote to say he'd got a mongoose and there's a picture of one in the book and I wanted to take it to show her. Thanks, Susan. . . ."

Susan smiled.

Her mother came through from the kitchen, hands full of plates. She said, "You're late, love. Did something happen?"

"No, nothing, mother. I'm sorry. . . . I stopped to help someone who was lost."

The older woman frowned and started arranging cork mats on the table. "Who was it?"

"A man called Mr. Sanderson. He had a car, and he couldn't find the way. It was all right, I knew him."

Her mother paused with a dinner mat in her hand. "There's no Sandersons on the estate. Not that I can think of. Susan. . . ."

"Yes?"

"You know what I've told you about things like that," said her mother for Melanie's benefit. "It isn't always a good idea to talk to people you don't know, even if they seem nice. Especially after dark. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, mother."

"Don't do it again then."

Susan shook her head slowly. "It was all right. He was ill but he's better now."

Her mother bit her lip and turned away and Susan sensed the worry churning in her mind. She smiled.

Back turned to her, her mother jerked. "Susan," she snapped, "*stop it. . . .*"

Susan followed her to the kitchen.

Out of sight of Melanie her mother turned to face her, gripped the girl's arms above the elbows and tried to see down into her eyes. But the eyes were veiled. She said "Susan . . ." Then she stopped and the frown came again, deeply. Her tongue stumbled, not seeming able to find the right words. "Your father and I," she said. "We're very worried. We were talking . . . we're both very worried about you. You will take care, won't you? Be so very careful. . . ."

Susan nodded quietly. "I shall be careful."

Her mother reached up and stroked the hair from Susan's forehead. Her eyes were flicking from side to side across the girl's face as though she was trying hard to understand something. "Susan," she said, and the words seemed to be squeezed out against her will, "Susan, dear . . . *who are you?*"

A long wait. The television played softly in the lounge. A car passed in the lane and the sound vanished in the distance. Then Susan shook her head. "I'm sorry, mother," she said. "I don't know what you mean. . . ."

She picked up the teacups and carried them into the other room.

—ALISTAIR BEVAN

THE EXCURSION

by B. N. Ball

"You'd think they'd have some sort of shelter at least," complained Mrs. Zulkifar. "I mean, it's not as though there's any pleasure in just waiting here with this sort of weather being hurled at you."

"Most inconsiderate," agreed Brigadier Wardle smoothly. "But, you know, as an old campaigner, I'm used to roughing it." He would have gone on, but he caught Dr. Dross's eye, reddened and turned to look around him.

There were five of them in the party. Dross, Wardle, Mrs. Zulkifar, and the young couple, Jack Old and Miss Sanger. Each had decided that the excursion to the old Seventh Asiatic Confederation fort was preferable to the free day that was the alternative suggestion of Galactic Autours. Dross was a scholar, and his interest in antiquities was his reason for coming on the visit. Wardle, the professional soldier, had announced that, for him, this was the climax of the eight-month tour of Old Sol and her primordial planets, in the phrase of the brochures. Mrs. Zulkifar had come along because she had reached an interesting stage in her knitting and wanted to keep it for the evening—if she had hung about the hotel she would have dashed it off during the day and then been left with nothing to occupy her in the evening. Miss Sanger never missed any of the day excursions. She blinked and gasped her way through all fifty-seven visits on seventeen assorted planets, satellites and asteroids. Jack Old followed her round all of them.

"Isn't it about time the guide got here?" Jane Sanger asked him.

"Time?" cut in the Brigadier. He glanced at his watch. "Local time, fourteen-twenty-one hours. Universal time's nine hours and three minutes after that. On your planet it would be—let me see, three—I'm wrong—four-eight precisely!" He looked around for approval. Anxious to

obtain it, he launched into an account of Terran time. The Julian calendar. Sidereal periods. Shifts. Lost days.

They all listened, fascinated by the concept of time. The flat, level plain around them was bare of buildings. No ships raced across the sky. This was what they had come on the trip for: to drift with time away from time into timelessness. They felt the pressures of the past in odd, fearful surges.

"The military mind," said Dross, his gross paunch shaking with a kind of merriment. "The habit of correctness. As a matter of fact, the guide's behind you."

They spun around. Jane Sanger repressed a shudder as she saw the flat, humanoid face of the robot.

"Why didn't you tell us before!" said Wardle irritably. "You! Why didn't you report yourself?" He glared from Dross to the robot and back again.

"No instructions," pointed out Dr. Dross. "He'll just wait for orders. This is Autours, Brigadier. You have to do it all yourself. That's how they can do it so cheaply."

"Are you a guide?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Yes, ma'am," the robot said in a pleasant baritone. "Your tickets, please."

Carefully, the robot checked the credit cards—fussily almost, thought Jack Old.

"Your name?" he asked.

"Homer, sir," said the robot.

"Classical," murmured Dross. "A legendary figure of early Solic times. The blind poet who sang of bygone days. Old, forgotten wars."

"Splendid!" said Brigadier Wardle heartily to no-one in particular. He looked at Mrs. Zulkifar as if about to make some gallant remark, but he thought better of it when he saw Dross's thin smile.

"I'm not sure," Jane Sanger whispered to Jack Old.

Old felt her light grip on his firm bicep. "Sure?"

"About coming." She looked at the thin mist, at the rain dripping from the bright red plastic robot, at the three older members of the party huddling beneath tiny force-shields, and back to Jack Old.

"You don't like robots?" he asked.

She shook her head, mumbling an incomprehensible answer that Old did not hear anyway.

"I'm not sure I'm glad I came!" announced Mrs. Zulkifar firmly. "Guides popping up from nowhere, and where are we going anyway? I can't see anything!"

They splashed through thick grass, muddy puddles, trampling down huge buttercups, until they came to a depression in the plain.

"These self-service tours are all very fine," went on the sharp voice of Mrs. Zulkifar, "but how do we know what's going on? At least when we saw Old Luna City there was a fully automatic strip right through it. *And* a commentary!" she added, looking pointedly at the bright red back they were following.

"No-one comes here," explained Dr. Dross. "Probably only half-a-dozen parties a year. It wouldn't pay to automate fully."

They stopped about a quarter of a mile from where the excursion craft had dumped them fifteen minutes earlier.

"We could have gone for a swim," said Jane Sanger.

"I know this is a free excursion, but I'm sure now I'd rather be back at the hotel," said Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Not to be missed!" announced Wardle breezily. "The most perfectly preserved military installation of Primitive days."

"Early Solic times," corrected Dross.

"And you never know," went on the Brigadier, ignoring the interruption, "we might just get a sight of the Hidden Fort!"

He spoke half-seriously. Old took him up on it.

"Could there be anything in the legend?"

"It's not impossible," Dross answered for Wardle.

Offended, Wardle turned away.

Homer faced them squarely. "Before the visitors descend to the Ancient Monument, will they please turn off all forcefields and leave them on the rack provided. A copy of the regulations concerning the Monument is available to each member of the party in the Reception Area."

As he spoke, a gap opened in the depression.

Homer stood waiting whilst they stepped down into the entrance of the shift tunnel.

"I've a good mind to wait here for you and just watch the rain," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "I've got my book. I could sit and read." But she followed the lead of the others, placing a gay little force-shield umbrella on the shelf Homer pointed out.

"Please step into the lift," said Homer. His baritone sonorously informed them that it was part of the original equipment of the underground fort, that it had been restored under an Inter-Galactic Ancient Monuments Fund grant, and that it was checked and serviced twice a year.

"One of the earliest examples known of molecular shift tunnels," announced Wardle, as Homer flipped switches. "Remarkable, when you think about it. At such a period."

"They weren't exactly savages," Dross remarked softly.

Before the first faint squeaks and odd sparks of light indicated that the tunnel was moving them through the earth, a stray gust of wind flicked at the light clothes of the women. One hard squall of rain sent a few drops of rain to splash their upturned faces.

"Cold?" asked Jack Old. Jane Sanger moved nearer to him.

"It is a bit mysterious and goose-pimply," she said.

The floor tilted slightly, and they moved downwards.

"What I've always wondered," announced Mrs. Zulkifar, after she had retrieved her novel from the floor, settled her wind-swept hair, and glared at Homer, "is what exactly happens when these things break down." She poked a finger about her at the dark, spark-starred tunnel.

"The journey to the Ruins takes exactly two minutes, seventeen seconds," Homer informed them, as if in answer to her question. "Hot coffee will be served on your arrival at the reception area. The tour will begin fifteen minutes after arrival." He resumed silence like a coat.

"Boom!" said Dr. Dross suddenly.

Wardle grunted. Jane Sanger's eyes widened.

"Pardon?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Boom!" said Dross louder.

"I really don't know what you can mean," Mrs. Zulkifar told him.

"I think I can explain," said the Brigadier. "The Doctor is talking about what would happen if the tunnel failed."

"What would happen?" asked Old. "Will we just be stuck in the earth?"

"Not really," said Dross. He was enjoying himself. "At the moment, we are displacing the constituents of matter for an infinitesimal time: before the matter is re-constituted, we displace the next section equivalent to our mass and energy. We have to move at precisely 'n' to maintain our equilibrium."

"'n' isn't a speed," the Brigadier inserted. "It's more of a—an—"

"Orbital movement," continued Dross. "An orbital spin is imparted to the mass we fill."

"And if it stops?" questioned Old.

"We have two lots of mass trying to fill the same space." Dross looked about him with interest.

"So 'Boom!'" said Old with a shrug.

"I could have finished my cardigan," said Mrs. Zulkifar to Dross. "Don't you feel a sort of premonition about this trip, Doctor?"

"Madam," said Dross, with some enthusiasm, "you must know that for me this trip is the fulfilment of an ambition I have held for many years now. As Reader in Early Solics I first came across a mention of the legends and traditions of this wonderful fort in an old microfilm one of my students dug up when he was doing some field work in the Vandersberg Complex. Premonition, you say, madam? Why, yes! But of excitement and the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity."

"Your big moment's come," said Old.

The corybantic of the lights ceased.

"Now what?" asked Jane Sanger. Jack Old smiled. Jane would always want direction.

"Coffee," he told her.

The reception area had an oddly modern look. It was a clear plastic blip, with the rock formations as decoration.

A corridor, wide and well-lit, led from it. The coffee, like all the amenities of Autours, was excellent.

"Regulations state that all members of the party should remain with the guide," Homer pointed out a quarter of an hour later. "May we begin please?"

"Do," said the Brigadier, assuming command.

"I suppose we may as well," said Mrs. Zulkifar.

Homer's delivery was excellent. Dross found himself wishing he could hold his students as well as the robot held their attention.

"Briefly, the fort was the last stronghold of the Seventh Asiatic Confederation peoples," he said. "The fort's position was plotted by the Neo-Negroids, and after a fanatical resistance culminating in bitter hand-to-hand fighting, it was ruined. It waits for you now exactly as it was after the last of the Asiatics died defending it."

The prosaic words, the history-book phraseology, and the living-deadness of the robot, made the sight harsher, the ruin more complete when they stepped into the fort. They could picture the small, yellow men, and the ungainly movements of the albino negroes from the subfusc Arctic regions as they hunted the last of the survivors down. How had the last Asiatic died?

"They died well," murmured Wardle's approving voice as their gaze wandered over the blasted fort.

"And you're an expert on dying," said Dross.

Not for the first time, Old noticed the tension between the two men. Quiet, half-menacing remarks from Dross had brought a spark of rage to Wardle's big, handsome face; but the Brigadier had borne Dross's comments without replying to them.

They followed the course of the fighting. Above them, a huge jagged hole had been ripped through the honey-combed tiers of command offices. Huge banks of control panels lay twisted fantastically, great fibred girders were strewn about cracked and crumpled; living quarters gaped, their bright furnishings still hanging. Three immense halls were fused into one block of basalt-like plastics where a torpedo had been fired at a group of desperate Asiatics who were attempting to blow up the fort, attackers, and

themselves in one colossal implosion. A weapons store half a mile long was untouched but for one immense split a hundred feet across, and through which the visitors could see ranks of ruptured storage tanks.

"Homer!" called the Brigadier.

"Sir?"

"You say the Asiatics fought hand-to-hand?"

"What's your interest, Wardle?" asked Dr. Dross.

Again, Jack Old sensed that feeling of unstated hostility between the two men.

"I'm a military man," Wardle pointed out. "Homer?"

The robot waited politely for a further few seconds before answering. "The Negroids wanted to recover the fort's equipment intact," he explained. "Whilst they could, had they so wished, obliterate the fort completely, they wanted the shift tunnels—they felt it was worth sacrificing three whole divisions in a massive assault by their underground armour to get the tunnels."

"Isn't it about time we started back?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

"In good time, madam," Dross told her. "We could spend a week here and only then begin to appreciate this fort's importance in Universal History."

Homer's circuits were aware of Dross's standing as a scholar; he listened without comment to the fat man's analysis of the fall of the Seventh Asiatic Confederation's last redoubt.

"An improbable tale," Dross told the others, "but for once the legendary Oriental cunning overreached itself. They thought they could rely on their warning systems, but the Negroids fooled them completely. They had found a primitive kind of orbital-spin device that they could put into tanks. All the Asiatics' cities went that way, and only this fort got any sort of warning."

"A few dozen technicians defended it for a month," Wardle added.

Only Mrs. Zulkifar was listening to the two men. Old and Jane Sanger had walked away towards a small assembly hall, perhaps a theatre of some kind.

"But there was no hint of their secret Hidden Fort," Dross said slowly. "Now, why was that?"

He was not talking to the two people in front of him, much less to Homer, who waited placidly as he would wait for other visitors for another millennium. Dross was questioning himself.

"They didn't know how to get it," said Wardle crisply. "Stands to reason. Otherwise, they'd have fought on. The way I see it is this: first, the surface installations were obliterated, and almost immediately the underground fort was attacked. For some reason, the fort was manned only by junior ranks. Why, we can't say. Probably never know. Some administrative failure. These things happen, even in war."

Dross smiled. "You should know, Brigadier," he said.

Wardle almost took him up, but he controlled himself.

"You mean there's *another* fort?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar. "Another one!"

"Possibly, madam," said Dross.

"Probably," the Brigadier emphasised. "Probably, Doctor Dross. There's no legend without some kind of substance."

"And it's connected with this place?"

"Most certainly, madam. There has to be a link. The legend's too strong for pure chance to have brought two separate myths together."

The two men glanced at one another. Their mutual hostility died down as they came to a certain understanding. Mrs. Zulkifar looked at her watch.

"I wish we could go back now," she said.

"Plenty of time!" the Brigadier said heartily.

"Two hours at least," said Dross. "Did I tell you anything of the marital customs of the Orientals?" he asked.

He led Mrs. Zulkifar away from the robot, talking vivaciously, and delighting the dowdy, middle-aged woman with his stories of the early days of Earth.

Wardle spoke sharply to the robot.

"Yes, I understand, sir," Homer said when Wardle had finished. "Until you call, sir."

The Brigadier hurried after Mrs. Zulkifar and Dross.

"Doctor Dross!" someone yelled. "Have a look at this!"

Jack Old's voice came thinly from the small hall, where he and Jean Sanger were looking at a tiny instrument panel.

"You spoke to the robot?" Dross asked Wardle. The Brigadier nodded. "Then let's see what our young friends have found," said Dross.

"You mean they took it all quite seriously!" Mrs. Zulkifar exclaimed. "But how on earth could they tell one another apart in the dark?"

"I'll explain later," said Dross, as he saw the glittering panel Old and Jane Sanger had discovered.

"So entertaining, the Doctor," Mrs. Zulkifar remarked to Wardle. "A real scholar—what a remarkable amount he knows!"

Wardle left her.

"What's this?" he demanded, pointing to the bank of instruments.

"You tell me," said Old. "One minute there was nothing, and then this appeared!"

Doctor Dross moved forward cautiously. "It just appeared? I mean, you didn't touch anything?"

"We walked in here, turned round, and by the time we'd looked around us, it was there," said Jane Sanger. "I suppose it's some sort of control panel. Something Autours put in. Maybe it's a video-tape machine for souvenirs! Jack! Let's try it!" She moved forward.

"No!" said Wardle sharply. "Don't touch it!"

Mrs. Zulkifar looked at him in amazement. "Why, really, Brigadier!"

"That's not a recent installation," said Wardle. "Look at it. It's in keeping with the rest of the fort—it's alien to our day."

"It's certainly Asiatic," agreed Dross.

"I think we'd better get Homer," said Old.

"He won't be coming," Dross told him. He did not trouble to explain when Old wanted to know why not.

Mrs. Zulkifar fiddled with her bag. The novel almost slipped out. "We shouldn't meddle," she said. "And we

shouldn't leave the guide. It's in the regulations—look." She fumbled in her bag.

The four others were grouped around the glittering panel.

"Here it is. Regulation Two. It distinctly states—Oh dear!" She dropped the novel. At the same time, she put her bag down firmly onto the panel. "I can manage, thanks," she began, as the Brigadier automatically bent.

"Back!" yelled Old suddenly.

Jane Sanger screamed. But she did not move.

"God!" shouted Wardle. "What is it!"

Old tried to yank Jane Sanger back, but it was too late. The ground fell away from them as the circuit Mrs. Zulkifar had activated closed. They looked terrified questions at one another; but all of them knew what had happened.

They were in a force-field. It was rougher and cruder than any they had ever experienced before.

Dross was the first to speak. "It was true," he said quietly. "Legend cannot lie. The Asiatics did have a concealed fort."

"I'm going back," Mrs. Zulkifar announced. She settled her bag firmly under her arm. "Brigadier Wardle, do something."

"I'm afraid you began it," the Brigadier said. "We—we can't do anything at the moment."

"I began it! How dare you!"

"Your bag, Mrs. Zulkifar," said Jack Old. "When you put it on the panel. That started it."

"Me!" Mrs. Zulkifar relapsed into silence.

"We're heading for the concealed fort?" Old asked Dross. "You're sure of it?"

"What else?"

"It's a mistake," said Jane Sanger. "Isn't it, Doctor? It's an accident—something's gone wrong, hasn't it?"

"On the contrary, young lady," said Dross, "in fact, I'd say that for the first time in rather more than a thousand years this piece of equipment is fulfilling its original purpose."

"This thing's a thousand years old!"

The steady flow of the centuries brought bright patches to her cheeks. "You mean it's still working!"

"In excellent order, I should judge."

"This is your idea," said Old. "This is what you came for."

"Homer!" said Mrs. Zulkifar loudly. "Send for Homer!"

The lights of the shift tunnel whirled dazzlingly back at her.

"I'm afraid it's no use calling for the guide," said Brigadier Wardle apologetically.

"You're in this too," said Old. "You and Dross. You planned it."

"Plan? Planned what?" said Jane Sanger.

"I'll explain," said Dross. "We told Homer to wait until he was called for. The Brigadier and I wished to make a survey of the fort without being overlooked."

"You told him to wait! Do you realise what that means?" said Jack Old. "Do you know what you've done?"

Dross giggled. "I know."

"Homer will wait until called. And until he is called, he'll stay there!" said Old.

"He won't report us missing?" asked Jane Sanger. She held on to Old.

"This is Autours, Miss," said the Brigadier.

"And how *are* we going to get back?" demanded Mrs. Zulkifar.

The question came as a cold flatness. No-one answered immediately. They looked at the thin shocks of energy slipping past them, rococo picture frames of forces with vivid sheets of colour occasionally splashing as molecular spin shook mass away from them.

Dross answered after a full minute had passed.

"That's the sort of question I usually give my students a pat on the back for asking," he told her.

"And they get an answer?" asked Old.

"No answer," said Dross.

Jane Sanger's face became distorted with fear. Men should know things. They made decisions, snapped out orders, accomplished actions, overcame difficulties.

"Jack, do something!" she shouted.

The three men looked at her in embarrassment. She knocked away Jack Old's comforting arm.

"You all stand there talking cleverly, and *you're doing nothing!*"

Mrs. Zulkifar reached out an arm and patted her. She whispered for a moment or two in the girl's ear in a soothing tone. When she had finished, Jane Sanger took out a compact and began a respray.

"It couldn't have been the robot that did this?" said Mrs. Zulkifar. "Machines do go wrong, you know."

Dross shook his head. "We'll know soon," he said. "Look at the lights."

The sparks and flashes had died down to pin-pricks of fire.

"Homer!" called Mrs. Zulkifar as the blackness faded.

They listened to the echoes bouncing back as they watched their surroundings take shape.

"The Hidden Fort!" exclaimed Wardle.

"You *would* say it like that," said Dross.

Invulnerable, massive, the ultimate in defensive capacity, the Asiatic fort lay before them. They were in a vast, low room from which radiated a score of corridors. A steady light streamed from blips in the roof.

"He's not here," said Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Who?" asked Jack Old.

"That guide robot—Homer."

"No," agreed Dross. "But you didn't suppose he would be?"

"I suppose not," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "It's rather frightening, isn't it? The atmosphere—cold and old."

"We've got to get back," Jack Old said. "There's a way back. There must be."

"Logical, young man, I'll give you that." Dross seemed in no hurry. He looked around him with a smile.

"It's perfect," said the Brigadier. "State of preservation—perfect. It's never been touched. Not in a thousand years. The power sources are still active."

"Must have been to get us here," pointed out Old. "What about getting back?"

Jane Sanger looked at him hopefully. "We can get back? I mean, Jack, we're not just stuck here for ever?"

"We'll be all right," he told her.

"Light—heating—air. They must have come on as we got here," said Brigadier Wardle. "Energy by the billion erg. Stored away, waiting for use."

Mrs. Zulkifar tapped impatiently on Dross's shoulder. "I know very well you two men simply want to stay here to play soldiers," she told them. "but please remember that we still have two more planets to visit. And a moon or two."

"How do we get the tunnel to work?" Old asked Doctor Dross. He looked about for a control.

Dross shrugged. "That's something we can discuss in a little while. I expect I can work it out, given time."

"We'll make for that," said Brigadier Wardle, pointing to a wide corridor. "There's something like a command room down there."

"I'm not moving from here," said Mrs. Zulkifar decisively. "It's up to the proper authorities to get us out. And in any case, why *can't* we just go back along the tunnel?"

"If we knew how it worked, we might try it as a last resort," said the Brigadier. "But only as a last resort. Consider what might go wrong if we were to punch an incorrect set of instructions into the controls. As for proper authorities, madam, I shall take charge of the party now."

Dross watched in fascinated hate as Wardle strode confidently along the corridor. He returned, satisfied with his inspection.

"Should we go with him?" asked Jane Sanger.

"It's that or starve," said Jack Old.

"Rubbish," Dross told him.

"Let's be realistic," said the Brigadier. "How much food have we? Any iron rations?"

"As usual, Wardle, you get straight to the periphery of the matter," said Dross.

"And what does that mean?" said Wardle, the hint of uncertainty carrying clearly in his strong voice.

"There's no point in quarrelling," Mrs. Zulkifar told them. She interposed her bag between them.

"Bless you for that thought, madam," said Doctor Dross urbanely. "But I don't think our military friend is considering using personal violence."

"I'm saying nothing to you, Dross. I won't quarrel with you. Not in our present position."

"We've got to eat," said Jane Sanger. "I mean, even I can see that. And I'm hungry now."

"You will eat, never fear," comforted Dross. "Hasn't it occurred to any of you that a place like this would be fully stocked?"

His words brought relief followed by sudden doubt.

"The air," Dross explained, waving an arm.

"I'm hungry," Jane Sanger said again.

"I've got some chocolate," Mrs. Zulkifar said. "In my bag somewhere. Just a bar or two."

"Don't eat them yet," Wardle ordered. "We may need the food later. I'm not sure the Doctor is right. We can't be sure that tanks will keep food fresh for a millennium."

"Brigadier—you sound afraid," said Mrs. Zulkifar. She handed a block of chocolate to Jane Sanger.

"The soldierly Brigadier Wardle afraid!" said Dross. "Never! Eh, Wardle?"

"There's a control room of some kind along there," Wardle said, ignoring Dross's remarks. "Obviously we'll have to make for it. I've reconnoitred and all seems well. Shall we go?"

They looked at Dross. Old, big-shouldered, tall, brown face pitted with radiation scars from a score of suns; Jane Sanger, her wide mouth curved downwards in anxiety; Mrs. Zulkifar nervously shredding the regulations; and Wardle, his normally straight back slumped forward. They waited for Dross, the paunchy, short, many-chinned intellectual.

"What else can we do?" he said.

A huge flowing inscription in blue on white metal circled the control room. Dross spelled it out slowly for them.

"'In the society of perfect man, it may well be that the only armaments permissible are those for defence.'"

"It didn't work," said Old at once.

"Couldn't," Wardle agreed. "Hit, and hit hard. Then hit again. Without mercy."

Dross gazed steadily at him, until the big man turned a brilliant scarlet and looked away. Jack Old watched, wondering.

"Now then," said Mrs. Zulkifar, "where shall we begin?" She looked eagerly at the huge banks of controls. "This looks interesting," she said, indicating a row of tiny buttons.

"We shouldn't touch—" began Wardle.

At the same moment, they clapped their hands to their ears as an unearthly whine of metal screaming against metal filled the air. The noise intensified, and though they bunched their fists against their ears, the howl drilled through the bones of their faces. Then they heard voices. High-pitched voices screamed at them, battered at their consciousness in a thousand tones. There was no room for thought, though one of them, Dross, felt somewhere within him a flicker of understanding, a thin wedge of memory stirring to tell him that a continuous stream of high-speed information deliberately designed to confuse and bewilder was one of the techniques of Asiatic interrogation procedure. Memory, thought, consciousness, were all extinguished within seconds.

* * *

"... wish I'd never ... could have finished ..."

"... Protest, sir—what kind of ..."

"... she all right?"

"... the noise ... crowding out ... Jack? Are ..."

"... so that's it!"

The party recovered consciousness at about the same time. Jack Old blinked round to find Jane Sanger looking for him. Mrs. Zulkifar re-packed her bag. The Brigadier wanted the culprit.

"Ultrasonics," said Dross. "A most ingenious application. I must say. They were used to cause hypnosis in a patient

in early medical days—and of course there were the non-curative applications."

"Where are we?" Jane Sanger asked.

"We've been moved," said Mrs. Zulkifar. She belched. "And fed."

"I expect this is some kind of interrogation room," Dross told them, looking around curiously at the smooth, bare walls of the big room.

"We're awake!" called the Brigadier. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Surely they can't be still alive!" exclaimed Jack Old. "It's a thousand years!"

Slowly, they began to appreciate the nature of what had happened to them.

"Trogloodytes," said the Brigadier. "Mind you, I expected as much. Underground race. They couldn't get back to the surface. Bred down here. Perhaps thought the surface uninhabitable."

"Married down here!" said Mrs. Zulkifar. The thought appalled her.

"It's possible," said Jack Old. "No reason why they shouldn't." Jane Sanger blushed.

"In-breeding. Dangerous. We'll have to be careful how we handle them," said Wardle seriously. "Better leave this to me. I've handled this sort of situation before."

"You had a fleet to back you up then, Brigadier," said Dross. "Remember? The outbreak on your Outcast world?"

Wardle turned dead eyes to him.

Mrs. Zulkifar said, "It's a good job we've got the Brigadier here at all, Doctor. You're not doing much to help. At least Brigadier Wardle is trying."

Wardle conquered some mental upheaval. "We'll all shout together," he ordered. "Anyone about? I say! Anyone there?"

"—there?" the others echoed him.

"What are you expecting?" Dross asked them, as the room ceased to ring with noise.

"The troglodytes—the Asiatics—to come," said Wardle crisply. "I'll put them in the picture—you know, de-

velopments in exploration and science, and so forth. I'll get in touch with Galactic Polity myself. Offer them terms. So long as they treat us well, of course."

"It'll have affected their physique," said Old. "Years of underground life. Only the fittest will have survived."

Dross laughed aloud, his gross paunch shaking. "Survival of the fittest?" he howled. "Might as well talk about the survival of the fattest!" He indicated his paunch.

"Hardly a suitable thing at a time like this, Doctor?" Mrs. Zulkifar asked sharply. "What will the Asiatics think?"

Dross adjusted his frame to a suitably comfortable position on a chair. "Have none of you yet realised what's happened to us? Aren't you able to adjust to the facts?"

Uncomfortably the little group waited for him to continue. He looked from one to another until Old burst out:

"The Asiatics have stunned us and picked us up—surely it's obvious what's happened."

"And you think they've been waiting here for a millennium to do that?"

"It's happened before—in a way," said Old defensively. He spoke for the four now facing Dross. They were sure, instinctively, that Dross's explanation would be worse than anything they could imagine. "There was the first starship to Andromeda. They were given up, yet they lasted over eight hundred years."

"Yes," said the Brigadier eagerly. "I remember reading about it when I was at Army College. Quite a few families, wasn't it? They lasted out. Why shouldn't the Asiatics?"

"It took three generations to get them back to something approaching civilisation," Dross told them. "Even then, some of them still sacrificed their first-born and kept their dead relatives in cupboards."

Jane Sanger shuddered. "What would a thousand years do to the Asiatics?"

"They could adjust," said Wardle.

None of them believed it, however.

"Tell us what you think, Doctor," said Old.

Dross addressed himself to Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Madam, consider the facts. We're here because in the first place we accidentally triggered an automatic device which activated the shift tunnel. Surely it's obvious that now we're under the control of yet another automatic device?"

"Rubbish!" snorted the Brigadier.

"Still another automatic device," smiled Dross drily. Furred teeth showed wetly. "A defensive reaction on the part of the Brigadier. He cannot face facts."

"It's all automatic!" said Old, looking round the big room.

"We've been picked up by some safety device, yes," said Dross.

"Thank goodness!" broke in Mrs. Zulkifar. "And it's fed us! Isn't that wonderful?"

"So we call it up and tell it to send us back?" said Jane Sanger.

"There's a fortune in this," said Jack Old speculatively. "Handled right, it could be worth thousands."

"Are you sure it will understand what we want?" asked Wardle. "The language, you know, Dross—have you thought of that?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Old. "There hasn't been a significant language change in almost fifteen centuries. And anyway it would be able to pick out a semantic pattern from any language."

Dross chuckled.

"What's so funny, Dross?" said Wardle belligerently.

Sweat rolled down the fat man's face as he began to shake with laughter.

"Doctor! Surely we're safe now?" exclaimed Mrs. Zulkifar.

"It's the first law of any robot device to obey," Jack Old said. "Of course we're safe."

Dross mopped his brow, laughing aloud.

"Amazing!" he got out finally. "Still you don't understand! We've all been arrested!"

* * *

"You seriously expect us to believe that we've all been apprehended for espionage?" said Mrs. Zulkifar.

It had taken ten minutes of fierce argument for them to accept the inevitability of Dross's statement.

"That it"—they thought of the robot fort as 'it'—"thinks we're Neo-Negroids because we're not pale lemon in colour!" Mrs. Zulkifar added.

"What's it going to do with us?" Jane Sanger asked.

"Nothing! Depend on it, miss. I'll see to that! I mean, surely it'll listen to reason? I mean, it's a responsible—er, machine? Eh?"

Jack Old saw that Brigadier Wardle was afraid. Machines were for obedience. The pattern was altogether alien to Wardle.

"Well, Doctor?" asked Old.

"It's not a pleasant situation," Dross said. "All we know is that we've been arrested. That means the fort believes we're intruders. So far as it's concerned, in all probability, the Asiatics are still containing the Neo-Negroids' attacks above us."

"What'll it do with us?" asked Old.

"Keep us for interrogation. We're valuable captives," said Dross. "We may know something useful."

"Interrogation by whom?" said Wardle. "Not the Asiatics, surely? There aren't any of them left!"

"They're all dead! They died a thousand years ago!" said Jane Sanger. "Dead men's machines!" Cold, sickening horror filled her.

"Precisely, Miss Sanger. As you say, there are no Asiatics left to question us. But I've no doubt that the machine is doing its best to report to the Duty Officer—a man, by the way, who died most valiantly some ten centuries ago—that five assorted suspects are now in custody. I should imagine also that it is in a state of some perplexity by now."

"Damn it, man! How can you be so cold-blooded about it! We might die down here!"

"Very likely, Brigadier," agreed Dross.

"You're not serious, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar. "You don't think we'll be incarcerated down here till we die of old age?"

Mrs. Zulkifar clutched her bag tighter. The novel fell out again. No-one offered to pick it up.

"Not quite, madam. When I say we may die down here, I didn't mean of old age. I should think that we'll be executed shortly."

The power of the fat man surged through the room. He was enjoying the climax of the little group's terror. A man whose tragedy was that he knew that he had a second-class mind, who realised too clearly and therefore hated his limitations, Dross, for the first time in his life, knew real power. Total, ungoverned power to hurt.

Wardle's eyes showed white rings to bright, blue pupils. His face was crimson, his hands bunched knots of strained sinew and bone.

Jane Sanger huddled against Jack Old.

"I'm getting out," said Jack Old. He looked the room over narrowly, searching for its weaknesses.

Wardle snapped. He acted instinctively.

"Come out!" he bellowed. "It wasn't me! Please! It wasn't me!"

Mrs. Zulkifar watched with a look that held pity as well as fear. She watched the dissolution of a strong man's character as she might have watched the death of a child.

"I'll do anything," promised Wardle brokenly. "I'm a friend. Just let me out!" His voice cracked, and he ran ponderously in small circles around the big room, feverishly searching for an auditory channel into which he could shout his fears and confess his faults.

It had happened too quickly for Dross. He had nothing to say about the big man's breakdown. The rest simply gaped.

"Doctor Dross," said Mrs. Zulkifar at last. "We'll have to rely on you, Doctor. You seem to know what is to be done."

Dross recovered his poise. He bowed ironically. "I'm flattered by your trust, madam—honoured even. Rest assured that I shall do whatever I can."

The words rang out clearly above the noise of Wardle's sobs.

"I don't like him," whispered Jane Sanger to Jack Old.

"Wardle!" called Dross. "Wardle, my martial friend! Come now, Brigadier, no more tears! This isn't the end—not yet, Wardle."

Jack Old walked across to Dross.

"Leave him alone," he said.

"Leave him alone!" exclaimed Dross. "My dear young racketeer, I wouldn't for worlds!"

Old winced at the term Dross used.

"Leave him," Old repeated quietly. "Whatever you think about him. No-one's a judge, Dross."

Jane Sanger and Mrs. Zulkifar looked at the two men. They were aware that a contest was taking place. It made them aware of their womanhood.

Dross twitched with malice.

"I give in," called Wardle.

"He's not worth your hate," said Old.

"Not hate," Dross insisted. "Consider, all of you, why we're here."

He spoke sharply and pointed to each of them in turn.

"Supposing it stops feeding us?" said Jane Sanger. She was a simple girl. Dross's malice did not touch her.

"Don't worry," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "Don't worry, my dear."

Dross glinted malignantly. "Consider why each of you is here," he repeated.

"We expected you to help—you of all people," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "A scholar and a gentleman."

She was appealing to a façade Dross had stripped off.

Jack Old looked helplessly at the two older men, Dross obscurely ill-disposed towards them, and Wardle fidgeting with his cap. He balled his fists.

Jane Sanger watched his big, smooth, flat hands curl into menacing fists as he moved lightly, body crouched forward, a competent, aggressive figure.

"Dross," he said, a threat in his voice. "Dross, explain all this. Now." He pushed the gross body into a chair.

"Violence," muttered Dross. "It will go against you. The Asiatics had a way of dealing with unwarranted violence."

"Now," repeated Old.

Wardle propped himself against a wall as he heard Old's harsh voice. The broken soldier cradled his head in his hands and moaned softly to himself.

"Very well," said Dross. "We're here awaiting trial and execution. Obviously we'll be found guilty of espionage—we're enemies, we're of the enemy physique, we can't give a proper account of ourselves. So we'll be killed in some relatively painless manner quite soon. But, you see, there's a peculiar beauty in our end. It's blind, random justice at work. Coincidence has brought together five people who are peculiarly unfitted to live—no, *please* don't argue, ladies," he said, holding up a pulpy white hand, "hear me out, do. And we are to be condemned by a robot judge which is wildly unfitted to judge our cases! Yet, you see, it is so right! Not fair, agreed, but just and right."

Dross's hints and evasions were at an end, the others saw. Now the Doctor was enjoying himself, putting forward a pet thesis he had been working on for some time. He leant back easily in the small chair.

"Let's begin with the Brigadier," declared Dross. "On the surface, a brave soldier, now retired on a satisfactory pension. Not enough to live in luxury, perhaps, but sufficient for him to indulge a taste for travel. A man honoured in his own corner of the galaxy for his resource and courage. But yet he is a coward and a genocide. A race-murderer."

Mrs. Zulkifar looked at the crab-like figure of the Brigadier and shuddered.

"I heard he had to be drastic with one of their Outcast planets," said Old. "But this doesn't make him a murderer. The way I heard it, it was the Outcasts or his police fleet."

"Wardle was a Captain Q.M. when a small K-type cruiser docked on his station," said Dross. "It had been sent out to investigate rumours of an uprising on the local Outcast planet. The Commander died as it reached the station—an old man. So H.Q. ordered Wardle to take command. Why not? He was combat trained and he had a sound ideologies background. And there were only juniors aboard the cruiser."

"I thought he took a fleet," said Old.

"And so he did, young man! So he did! He mobilised the whole reserve! Brave Captain (Q.M.) Wardle blasted off at the head of a fleet that comprised a modern cruiser, two old dreadnoughts and a couple of dozen light scouts. Naturally, the Outcasts saw the fleet approaching and sent out a small inter-planetary vessel to meet it. Wardle thought it was a missile-ship, so he blasted both ship and planet."

"That's not the way it was reported," said Old. "The Outcasts had a fleet, surely?"

"So Wardle claimed," said Dross. "And I wonder how his story came to be accepted. But on thinking it over—as I have done on many occasions during the past thirty years—I think I can tell you how it happened. First, he was the only senior officer in the fleet. Secondly, only enthusiastic amateurs officered most of the vessels. Thirdly, the only efficient control-of-battle equipment was under his direct command and personal supervision. By a combination of others' lack of experience and lack of confidence, he could easily sway his officers into believing his version of the encounter."

"You can't be sure of this," said Jack Old.

Dross beamed at him. "Not sure. But sure enough. Just as I'm sure that you are a professional smuggler and cheat, young man. One knows certain facts, finds out others, deduces from those th—"

Jack Old's fist drove for the fat neck, choking off the piping, evil voice. But Dross's eyes still gleamed delightedly as he took the blows.

"Or—that—" choked Dross, fighting for breath, "that Mrs. Zulkifar abandoned her family, and that Miss Sanger is a—"

He saw the fist flicking towards him again and made no attempt to avoid it. When his head snapped back, he tried to bunch slack muscles to recover his balance.

Jane Sanger grabbed Old's arm. She clung on with a strength that surprised him.

"No, Jack!" she said, as Dross got up.

With blood streaming from his face, he said, grunting through split lips, "That Miss Sanger is a whore!"

The girl was flung away as Old leapt forward. Three vicious, rocking blows sent Dross crashing unconscious to the floor.

Wardle opened his eyes briefly and looked through sheltering fingers. Jane Sanger and Mrs. Zulkifar gaped, horrified at the noisily-breathing figure of Dross.

"I'm not ashamed of it," said Jane Sanger quietly. "I don't know how he found out, and I never would have told you, Jack, but now that you know, I'm not ashamed of it."

Old stiffened. He was going to hear something he wanted to avoid knowing.

"Was it the Happy Planet?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

Jane Sanger nodded. "Only till I could buy my bond of servitude from my father's overlord," she said. "Otherwise I'd still be holding a rake in the lord's gardens. Unless he happened to favour me. You see, on my world, you're born either as a serf or a lord."

Mrs. Zulkifar put an arm round the girl, who had begun to sob, the bitterness of a love lost in her now-ugly face. Old's big shoulders seemed to have telescoped in on themselves. He looked older. Three months as a temple prostitute was too much for him to face, even though he knew that on the bleak planets of Messier 16f this was the only way out for a woman of the lower castes.

But his next actions surprised the two women.

He knelt beside Dross's body, straightened the fat man's sprawled limbs, and wiped the blood from his face.

"He's right about me," Old told them as he stroked caked blood from the fat man's distorted face. "I run anything that's in demand. So do others. What of it?"

"You'll want to know about me, my dears," said Mrs. Zulkifar.

"No," said Jane Sanger. "No, Mrs. Zulkifar."

"Jane's right," said Jack Old. "Why worry about what's past. I could explain how I got into the rackets, but you wouldn't understand. It's not a simple right-or-wrong thing. Let it all ride."

They had no more to say to one another.

They waited. Their eyes took in every detail of the

simple room; they would never forget its starkness. The six small chairs, the single table, the single opening in the high roof, a small black hole, which was the only sign that there was any contact between their cell and the rest of the millennially-managed fort.

Wardle stood entranced. He was thinking about rows of neatly-stacked helmets — space-helmets, combat-helmets, helmets for light-pressure planets, helmets for use on huge, heavy-gravity planets; he had always been interested in how helmets were stacked. Dross was unconscious, too, and he also dreamt. He composed glittering epigrams he could not quite phrase as a billion appreciative students applauded politely the sibilant, Asiatic inflections.

There had to be a doorway, Old was thinking. But it could be anywhere in this deceptive cell. The room was built to confuse, to disorientate. He looked at the slope of the walls. One wall seemed to be half as tall again as the one opposite; but it was an illusion. The metals of the floor were arranged in three different patterns of alloys; you could read faces and characters into them. You could lose yourself in their windings and traceries that led one into another, diverting your attention from their main theme, inverting your starting point; making you question your own powers of deduction and concentration, so that you began to question your sanity.

Mrs. Zulkifar wished she had brought her knitting. Or that she had not already read her novel twice.

Jane Sanger stared at Jack Old. She wondered if she could ever explain what life was like on her planet. The day of a gardener. The year of a serf. The life-time of a slave.

Time passed, not so much in minutes, as in cycles of thoughts, waves of emotion; when a sickening realisation of their predicament crossed the hurly-burly of their thoughts, they looked again at watches.

When it came, the voice shattered them emotionally:

"Stand!" it ordered. Flat, incisive, metallic, the voice came from every part of the cell.

Without looking at one another, they obeyed, scrambling to their feet, eyes darting and necks craning as they

strained to see something—anything—that would serve as a focus of attention. The harsh command penetrated to Wardle's addled brain, and to Dross's confused thoughts. They stood.

"In accordance with Article Seven of the Human Rights Charter, you are entitled to state your cases," it told them. "You are also entitled to know that you are being held as suspicious aliens present on restricted territory. You are not obliged to speak, but you may make a statement which will be referred to the Director of Operations. Name yourselves."

Old shuddered. The Director had been blasted down a thousand years before. This voice spoke from the graves of a hundred decades.

"Wardle, Brigadier Wardle!" snapped out the Brigadier. "I'm innocent. I defy you to prove it. I killed no-one." His voice rose. "I'm innocent! You'll have to give me full rights as a prisoner-of-war?" His tone dropped until he whispered, "I give in."

"Nordic, age fifty-eight, medium grade administrative or military service," classified the robot voice. "Suspicious."

"Thinking aloud!" muttered Dross through split lips. "Degenerative."

"I'm Mrs. Zulkifar. We're on a tour." The inadequacy of her words grated on all of them. She shrugged. How could she explain a thousand years of Universal history to a robot she couldn't see?

Dross tried.

Old listened, interested by Dross's revival. Whatever Dross said would be automatically suspect—the robot fort would be conditioned to expecting unlikely stories. It would weigh up Dross's words in the light of its conditioning. And it seemed that the fort's deductive banks had not stood up too well to the passage of time if it was considering aloud.

"You must try to adjust to this," Dross was saying. "The world as you know it has ceased to exist. A thousand years ago, the Seventh Asiatic Confederation was destroyed. I am a lecturer and research scholar at a university on a planet the existence of which was unknown in

Asiatic days. Further, yours is an *obscure* period." He paused to moisten his lips.

"Verbose," commented the robot. "And subtle. The others?"

"Jack Old. Courier and despatcher. Patents Executive."

"Miss Jane Sanger." The clutch at respectability. "A secretary."

Dross tried to take up the thread of his argument, but the robot brushed aside with some asperity his speeches. It listened without comment to the stumbling statements of the rest of the party as they detailed their backgrounds.

"No decision can be made yet on your future," it said at last in a reasonable manner. "Pending a final decision, you may state your cases. First, confess your motives in becoming spies—humanitarian consideration will be shown when they have been examined. You first, Jack Old."

He turned to Dross.

"What can I say?"

Dross shrugged.

"Would it make any difference?" Old said.

"Only to the manner of execution, I should judge," said Dross. "Eh, Wardle?"

Old looked desperately at the solitary orifice in the roof. "You're mad!" he shouted suddenly. "You're obsolete! You're just a survival. You're dead!"

Dross smiled. His shrug said he would not oppose the robot fort's findings. Not strenuously.

"Wardle?" the metallic voice said sharply.

Brigadier Wardle sobbed, but said nothing.

"If you don't let us go, I'll report this to your superior," Jane Sanger said steadily. "This is going too far. I didn't want to see this rotten fort, but Jack—" Her frail composure cracked. "What are you keeping us for! Let me out!"

"Dross?"

"Take me to your superior," said Doctor Dross.

There was a pause of some seconds before the machine-harsh voice said, "Request will be considered."

"Then take down my confession," said Dross. "I have a full confession to make."

"Dross!" bellowed Jack Old warningly.

Dross ignored him. "We are spies," Dross agreed. "I wish to change my first statement. It was false."

"Proceed."

"First, you'll have to restrain Old. He is a dangerous saboteur."

Jack Old rushed for Dross. For a few moments there was a terrible game of dodging played as the fat man placed the table and chairs between himself and Old. Then Old nimbly jumped the table.

They all heard the thin whine of air and steel as the coil of metal slipped over Old's shoulders. It came from the roof, a slender, almost dainty-looking slip; it held the big man securely, clamping him to the floor. Jane Sanger screamed as a thin jet of liquid splashed from a gap in the floor into Old's face.

"Jack!" she screamed. He was unconscious when she reached him.

"Swine," she said to Dross.

He looked at her, puzzled. Then he reached out a hand to pat her arm.

"It's the best way, my dear. If I tell the machine we're spies, we'll be executed at once. Honourably. The machine will certainly have the authority to kill us without reference to a superior if I say we're saboteurs. As a matter of fact, I've got a small force-field umbrella in my pocket—actually, I forget I have it most of the time. Academic vagueness! My students always have satirised it!"

"What are you talking about, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Death, Mrs. Zulkifar. Death, madam. All I have to do is to activate my umbrella. And say that it is a sabotage device. It will have to kill us at once, then. Quickly and cleanly. There will be no lingering in a cell for years waiting till there is a breakdown in the food supplies."

"No-one likes to die, even at my age," said Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Alone? For years, Miss Sanger?" Dross appealed to Jane Sanger. Her eyes slid to Old's unconscious form.

"We all owe a death—each one of us," went on Dross dreamily.

Clearly, the idea of death filled him. He wanted death—the feeling of the change from life to lifelessness was in his eyes.

"Who are so ready to die as we?" he finished. "Flawed lives, every one."

Jane Sanger sobbed. Wardle caught the sound of weeping and looked up brightly. Some freak of mentality restored him to his old self.

"Mustn't cry, my dear," he told her. "Here, dry those tears." Jane Sanger looked at him in astonishment. She took the proffered handkerchief.

"You don't know anything about us, Doctor." Mrs. Zulkifar looked at Dross angrily. "You can't make decisions affecting all of us because of your assumed knowledge. It's sheer intellectual arrogance!"

"Possibly. But you can't deny that here we have a genocide, an ex-prostitute, a desperate smuggler, and of course, a bitter anti-humanist—myself, madam."

"I'm still not ashamed," said Jane Sanger.

"Quite right, my dear," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "I'd have done the same myself."

"Then we're agreed? Or at least resigned?" asked Dross.

"You're wrong about me, you know," said Wardle calmly. His mood of lucidity had lasted through Dross's speech. It passed, though, as soon as he had spoken, and he closed his eyes and dreamt of his dead wife. Stars wheeled ecstatically for him as he re-lived his honeymoon trip to one of the outer Andromedan clusters.

"You're just going to let us die?" whispered Jane Sanger. "Because you think we're worthless?"

"Do you want to wait down here for a Duty Officer who died a thousand years ago?"

"You could get us out," she told him.

"And restore this"—he gestured impatiently at the two men—"to the human race?"

"But you *could* get us out," insisted the girl.

Dross could not resist this appeal to his capacity. Intellectual pride struggled with nihilism.

"Possibly," he admitted. "But I think not." He reached for his pocket.

"I'll kill you," Jane Sanger said. "I'll kill you." She had a fine-bladed dagger in her hand.

"I'd forgotten," said Dross. "They teach you to handle awkward customers on the Planet, don't they? Have you ever killed?" He might have been asking the girl's taste in flowers.

"I would."

"Sensible girl. Say nothing about the past. But what *is* your threat? To kill me?" He laughed in her face.

"Listen to me, then," said Mrs. Zulkifar urgently.

Dross paused, his face less bitter. Maybe it was the helplessness in the girl's face, the slackness of defeat as she sheathed the knife; or maybe it was the innocent way she slipped her dress aside revealing a perfect breast as the blade nestled into the leather sheath. It could have been the way she looked at Old.

"Well, madam?"

"Proceed with your confession, Doctor Dross," commanded the robot voice.

"Shortly," said Dross. "Give me a few minutes."

"Agreed."

Old struggled for consciousness as Mrs. Zulkifar spoke.

"We had three young children," she said. "He was a star-hopper, a gypsy, though—he wanted to cross the galaxies and then on again. He was a gypsy engineer. Travel cost him nothing. He'd come back for a week or a month or a year, but he'd always go again. The children hardly knew him. I stayed with them till the youngest was old enough to get into Space School—all three had the same itch. I worked as a clerk in a travel agency till they grew up. I had to—my husband sent money, but never enough. And do you know what happened to me over the years? I got the craze for travel! I saw the tapes and the stereos, and I listened to the travelogues. After twenty years looking over a counter in the office, do you know what they did to me?" In a rush to tell him now, she laughed as she spoke. "They gave me the freedom of the lines! That was part of my pension. I've been wandering ever since."

Old saw that she was weeping quietly, as he came round.

"I never saw Tom in all those years. Not once. But if I did see him, do you know what I'd tell him? I'd just say that I understood. That's all I'd say to him, Doctor."

Dross let the tiny force-field umbrella slip back into his pocket.

"I checked carefully," said Dross. "Your records—" He did not finish. He found it impossible to phrase the apology; he only half-realised he was admitting that he was wrong.

"And Jane," went on Mrs. Zulkifar. "You called her a whore. That's what she was. What can you say about it?"

"Three months," said Jane Sanger. "Only three months out of a lifetime."

Dross looked across to Brigadier Wardle. The thought crossed his mind that he had not examined the primary sources of his information—he had not kept to the scholar's golden rule. Hearsay and secondary sources were all he had formed his opinions on.

"I traded in ideas," Jack Old told him. "I'm not saying this to save my neck, or not only for that reason. You see, Dross, you yourself don't understand very many matters. You've lived a certain kind of life, and you're judging us all by the standards of that life. You say I'm a racketeer—that's right. I pick up patents, drive on across to another galaxy and record them as originals. I sell out cheap and move on before someone catches up with me."

"Almost a public service," said Dross.

"Sneer if you like," Old told him. "But don't forget that restrictive patenting has killed a lot of good ideas."

Dross's face showed that he was troubled. A few minutes ago, it had all seemed simple. Justice was to be done—blindly, inevitably; ironically even. The past striking into the present. Fate and a pattern of transgression and punishment. Had he been so tied-up intellectually with the sheer beauty of the pattern that he had not fully analysed the situation? Was he arrogant—stupid?

He was, he decided.

"I was wrong," he told them. "Quite wrong." He spoke with some humility.

"Please continue with the details of your confession," said the robot voice.

"Have you contacted the Duty Officer?" asked Dross decisively. A change had come over the little, fat man. He leaned forward in his chair, his whole pose suggesting the contours of challenge. He looked poised for action.

"No man lives to a thousand years," he was told.

"If he does not reply, he is not there," said Dross calmly.

"He is not there," agreed the machine.

"So he is dead," said Dross.

The robot pondered this. It seemed unsure when it spoke.

"Proceed with your confession of intended sabotage."

"I am the Duty Officer," announced Dross.

"You have been apprehended as a suspect," the robot answered sharply. "You are Nordic. Therefore you are not Asiatic. You are a spy."

"I am one thousand years old," said Dross.

"No man lives to a thousand years," he was told.

Dross probed for weaknesses, whilst Jack Old thought of escape. His big frame strained against the shackles, testing them.

"A thousand years have passed since a human last communicated with you," Dross said. "I am a human. Therefore I am a thousand years old."

Unimpressed with false syllogisms, the machine became peremptory.

"Your confession," it snapped.

"What are your powers?" continued Dross.

"Apprehension, interrogation. Under some circumstances, condemnation and execution."

"Can you release those apprehended?"

"Only if authorised by the Duty Officer."

"What is the Duty Officer's name?"

"Captain Ahmed Tofat," the robot said promptly.

"When is he due to be relieved?"

"0700 hours."

"What day?"

"Third weekday."

"Date?"

"Seventh period, three thousand two hundred and eighteen after Blow-up."

Dross calculated quickly.

"It is now the second weekday of the nineteenth period, four thousand three hundred and one after Blow-up."

Seconds ticked away as the robot digested the information, assessed its value, and tried to rationalise.

"Trying to confuse it?" whispered Old.

Dross nodded. "It must be faulty somewhere. Nothing could last a millennium and not fault. If I can find some kind of pattern I might be able to break it down."

"You're—you're with us?" said Jane Sanger.

Dross nodded, smiled, and bowed to her.

"What then?" asked Old.

Dross shrugged. "Hope it surrenders—as Wardle collapsed and surrendered."

Old whistled in admiration. "It's a long shot, but if it comes off, we're clear!"

"The fort above this has been destroyed," said Dross sharply. "It does not exist. All its crew were wiped out by the Neo-Negroids. This happened a thousand years ago! Therefore you have no Controller!" Dross's voice rang through the room as the robot began to rumble. "All robot devices must have a human Controller. Therefore you are uncontrolled!"

He paused for breath.

"Superficial logic," the robot voice commented. Was there the hint of a doubt there?

"All Asiatics are dead," answered Dross. "You must obey a human. I am a human. Obey me."

"Spy!" There was no doubting the unrest in the machine's voice.

"I am the Duty Officer. I am one thousand years old. I am a human. Today is the second weekday of the nineteenth period, four thousand three hundred and one after Blow-up. You are an uncontrolled machine."

Dross paused for breath. Immediately, the robot replied:

"All spies must be interrogated. All spies must confess. The fort is to be protected at all times. False statements must be rejected."

"What day is it?" asked Dross. "What time is it? What day, period, year, is it now? Now!"

Silence. Mrs. Zulkifar patted Jane Sanger's hands.

"Have you done it?" asked Old.

"I've done something," said Dross. "But don't expect too much. This could easily go the wrong way."

"How?" asked Jane Sanger. "What could happen?"

"At worst, it would execute us," said Dross. "But probably it intended to do that, anyway. It's the logical thing to do under the circumstances. It has certain powers, as it told us. But if I can throw some doubts into its workings, then at best we shall be in a situation where the machine will ignore us. What I'm hoping is that it will retreat from an impossible situation—as Wardle has done. It can't admit we're a thousand years later in time than itself, since it would then have no reason to exist at all. What it might just conceivably do is to pretend we don't exist. From what I can make out of its present dilemma, it wants to believe it was in touch with a Duty Officer some few hours ago."

"And he's dust," said Old.

Idly, Dross flicked the force-field umbrella from hand to hand.

"Put that down!" said Mrs. Zulkifar. "You might turn it on!"

"Sorry," said Dross.

"Your force-field?" asked Old, craning his neck to see.

"I forgot to leave it behind," apologised Dross.

"Pass it over," Old told him. "You never know when little gadgets like this might be useful."

"Oh, Jack!" Clearly Jane Sanger had faith in him still. Old ignored her. By turning on his side, he had the use of his hands.

"There's a surprising amount of energy in these things," said Old. "Particularly when it's directed in a narrow beam." He twisted until, with a faint click, the tiny device lay in pieces in his big hands.

The others watched him uneasily as he deftly rearranged the cells and glittering components of the force-

field. Old grinned at them, and the atmosphere in the cell became hopeful.

"You learn all sorts of tricks in my job," he told them.

"I'm sure you do," Dross told him drily. "I hope this is more than usually successful, however."

The metallic voice of the robot shattered the mood.

"You must die!" it announced. Though the voice was the same clear note, there was a hint of arrogance in it.

Brigadier Wardle again achieved a moment's lucidity. He drew himself up, a big man with the figure of a soldier.

"Very well, sir," he answered. "I accept the findings of the court-martial. I am ready for death—I understand that it is the least punishment possible for my crime against humanity. I ask only that I die a soldier's death."

"Agreed," said the robot voice promptly.

"Six in the morning by gunfire," said Wardle peacefully, a man at rest with himself.

How long had he been waiting for this sentence? wondered Old. Dross fought for time.

"We all claim the same right," he said quickly. "We are combatants in the pay of the Neo-Negroids, and you cannot refuse a soldier's death for us."

The machine wheezed for a moment. Some mechanical fault could be heard, some distortion of sound waves. But to the listeners it had the hint of a malicious chuckle.

"Agreed," it said. "Food and sanitary arrangements will be provided. Do not attempt to interfere with the installations. Each one is fully protected."

A wall sank away to reveal washrooms. Another fell back, and a canteen appeared.

"Hospitality at last," said Old, as his shackles fell away and slid back into the roof.

He tossed the field-force casually to Dross.

"That should help now," he went on. "But don't point it my way! There's enough energy there to blow a hole through a thousand like me!"

"Food," said Jane Sanger. "And a chance to clean up!"

"Come and eat something, Brigadier," said Mrs. Zulki-far. He let her lead him.

"This is our only hope," Dross told Old. "But let's eat first."

When Jane Sanger returned, she looked radiantly at Old; his eyes dropped away as she sought him out, but his small smile gave her hope. They all ate hugely together, finding relief from their anxieties in the simple act of filling their bellies. When they finished, Jack Old took charge; action was required, so quite naturally the others looked to him for a lead.

"Tell us what to do, Old," said Dross.

"What's the plan?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar, looking with distaste as Old still hefted the device from hand to hand.

"I'll blast a hole through the roof. This thing will cut through eight or nine roofs like this. Then up we go."

"Why not laterally?" asked Dross.

"Is it really a blaster now, Jack?" said Jane Sanger wonderingly.

The simple flattery made Jack Old smile at the girl.

"A hunch," he replied to Dross. "Anyone got a small metal tool—a knife?"

Jane Sanger shyly took out the tiny dagger. "This do?"

"Yes." There was a surprised look on Old's face, but he said nothing.

"Look, everybody," he said, when he had finished. "When I join these two circuits with this blade, it goes off. I'm hoping that by cutting through the roof I'll damage the cell's equipment so much that we'll be able to get clear, at least for a while. I may damage the air supply too, so be quick. Once you're through, grab a weapon—there'll be plenty of small-arms stuff about in racks—and squirt anything down that looks as though it's going to move. All ready?"

"I only hope you know what you're doing, young man," said Mrs. Zulkifar, who thought that Jack Old was quite like Tom in his ways—more determination, perhaps, and less charm, but with that feeling of energy about him.

"Quite ready," said Dross.

Jane Sanger smiled. The Brigadier saluted.

They realised that they were one now, a single unit of cowardice and cynicism which had become, somehow,

hope and courage, of hopelessness and despair which had changed into resourcefulness and energy.

The blast was far more than they were prepared for. A huge hole suddenly appeared above their heads. Almost circular, it sliced through a score of stories, each illuminated brilliantly by the billions of displaced atoms which rang together with a noise like a carillon of bells. The sound beat on the eardrums, rising in crescendo as the beam of the force-field ate upwards, and when it ceased, they were left stunned and dazed.

Already Old had moved. He pushed Wardle to the base of the hole.

"Here, sir! And you Dross! Help me up!"

The two men lumberingly co-ordinated their efforts, and as Old sprang for their linked hands, they heaved. He clung for a moment to the rim of the hole and then hauled himself through.

"What's there?" called Dross.

"Come along, Doctor!" ordered Brigadier Wardle loudly. "Up you get!"

The explosion had brought the broken man to a measure of confidence. He lifted Dross bodily as a weight-lifter lifts—he had Dross firmly by neck and knees, pressing the short fat man upwards slowly and agonisingly until Old added his efforts, and Dross lay gasping beside Old.

The women were no difficulty. Mrs. Zulkifar tried to preserve some decorum, but Jane Sanger stepped lithely to Wardle's shoulders with no attempts at modesty.

When Old had hauled up the Brigadier, the old soldier's eyes immediately lit up.

"A sally!" he called.

He dashed down a low corridor and flung two lacey structures in some dull green alloy to Dross and Old.

"Some kind of weapon, obviously," began Dross, but Old had already sent a flickering lance of flame along the corridor. A small red light shut off as the flame reached it.

The guns fitted easily under the crook of their arms, and the men moved forward, their fingers automatically finding the firing mechanism.

"Everything that moves or lights up!" shouted Old. "Blast it!"

"Is this the right way?" called Mrs. Zulkifar.

They had moved off in the direction of the big corridor to their right.

"There!" shouted Dross, too excited to do anything but call out.

Two weapons stuttered with white and yellow fire as a slight movement of metal showed ahead. Jangling echoes of rending mechanisms rang satisfyingly down ahead of them. They sprayed every orifice as they advanced, sending jagged lances of flame as they reached every corner. But each corridor looked like the previous one. And they seemed, oddly, to be descending.

"Back!" yelled Old suddenly.

Jane Sanger stumbled and almost fell as a pit gaped in front of them. The fort was fighting back, though half its communication channels had been shattered. But it knew its own resources. It was built to contain this sort of penetration.

The pit glowed at them, and then horrifyingly advanced towards them, a whirlpool of orange fission in its centre.

They fired again and again into its depths, hoping to blow up the activating mechanism, but still it crept towards them.

"Behind us!" yelled Jane Sanger.

Wardle whirled to see a dull black mass approaching. He remembered his weapons courses at that moment, and became the dynamic military man. The ghosts of a hundred million Outcasts were driven from his soul, and he acted with superb precision. This was his fight. This was what he had been trained for.

He blew a jagged hole through the wall at their sides, leapt for a small antique cannon, flicked levers, adjusted sights, and, grunting under the weight of the atomic cannon, made for the grinding black mass that moved towards them.

"Through there!" he yelled, pointing to the escape tunnel he had blown.

Pure energy lanced viciously into the black mass, but

still it came on. Old turned and he and Dross added the fury of their fire.

Wardle turned his weapon to its maximum output. He jumped to the side as he fired. Even with the shelter of the room into which he leapt, he was whirled around, blinded and stunned, by the hammer-blows of force that shook the massive interleaved blocks of the fort.

Old looked out cautiously and saw the pit swallowing the mass of the mobile monitor-robot.

"Surrender!" called the voice of the robot fort. "You must surrender! I arrest you in the name of the Seventh Asiatic Confederation! You will be honourably treated if you lay down your arms!"

Jack Old looked at his scarred, distorted weapon.

"We've got to get to the central controls," he said urgently. "It's still fighting back. And we're lost."

"Get the Duty Officer!" yelled Dross.

"I am a thousand years old!" called Jane Sanger.

Old laughed with her.

"Fine!" he called. "Come on!"

"This way," said Wardle, as the beam of his weapon sliced a hole through the plastic wall.

"No!" called Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Forward!" yelled Wardle.

They swept forward, ignoring Mrs. Zulkifar's yell of protest.

The gap closed behind them.

"No!" said Jane Sanger in despair.

They were back in the cell. And it had repaired itself.

"It can't be!" said Jack Old unbelievably. "No, it can't be!"

He raised his gun to blast free once more. The weapon swung to cover an area halfway up the far wall. He pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

"Common criminals!" yelled the robot voice at them. There was a rasp in the voice, an overtone of triumph. "You are hereby sentenced to death by gassing! Your bodies will be removed for dishonourable burial! That is the sentence of the Confederation!"

"Death!" said Dross.

He too tried to shoot his way out, a man no longer with a strong compulsion to die.

Wardle shook his head, tried his own weapon, and hurled it at the far wall.

"De-activated," he said. "Another little trick."

"This isn't the end?" said Jane Sanger.

A hundred tiny holes suddenly appeared in the floor.

Jack Old reached for Jane Sanger.

The sound of gas escaping filled the cell.

* * *

Old pushed hard. His hand felt warm flesh. Soft, human flesh. Warm. Alive?

He explored and felt the slow expansion and contraction of a rib-cage. Jane Sanger, he identified.

Heavy breathing became quick gasps of breath all around him. Then there was the deep, happy sound of laughter in the darkness.

"Wonderfull!" piped Dross's voice. "But too much! Too much, by the ten thousand heads of Hydra!"

"We're alive," said Wardle.

"Well, Doctor?" asked Mrs. Zulkifar.

"Jack!" moaned Jane Sanger softly.

"The gas," explained Dross. "It's inert! The fort believed its own fantasy so deeply that it wouldn't renew the poison capsules in the execution chamber! The chemicals composing them must have deteriorated somehow—after all, it's a thousand years. But the anaesthetizing gas did work!"

"Where are we?" asked Old.

"Buried," said Dross. "Disposed of. We're rubbish."

"How do we get out?"

"There'll be a way. Do you remember the feeling of falling when you went under?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Zulkifar. "I tried to hold my breath, and I managed to do it for a minute or two—then I had to breathe. But I felt the floor go."

"Crawl round until you find a way out," said Dross.

It took them three hours to find a simple sewer-like entrance. There was a bad part when Jane Sanger came across the bones of a score of men.

"Neo-Negroids?" asked Old.

"That I shall find out," said Dross. "A bizarre note in my forthcoming book on the fort."

"We're going to escape? Really, Doctor?" asked Jane Sanger.

"Of course, my dear!"

"Won't we be stopped again?" asked Old.

"We're dead," Dross explained. "It can't acknowledge our existence now. Watch what happens."

He led them out. Immediately they ran into a complex of alarm rays.

Seconds later, the installations burst into flames.

"Short-circuits," explained Dross. "We are reported—described in detail. Control says we're dead. The periphery alarms say we're very much alive. Two conflicting sets of data. And a robot that can't adapt."

Their progress was accompanied by blowings of bigger and bigger warning systems as they neared the centre of the huge fort. Dangerous-looking weapons swivelled towards them, but they lost their menace, since they could not be ordered to fire.

Dross smiled cynically as the young couple walked hand in hand.

"You're remarkable, Doctor," said Mrs. Zulkifar as Dross quickly led the to the shift tunnel they had come by.

"Madam, I thank you," he told her. "And may I say that you are a remarkable woman?"

"We've all had a hard time," Brigadier Wardle mused. "I suppose we'll remember it?"

* * *

"Tourists must not wander unattended by a guide!" snapped Homer at them. "I must report this lapse to Autours. There will certainly be a charge for excess use of my services!"

"A charge!" repeated Jack Old in amusement.

"And I am not authorised to allow you to complete the tour of the Asiatic fort," Homer told them. "This means that you will be unable to see all the sights."

"Homer, I don't believe you know this fort as well as you think," said Dross.

—B. N. BALL

OVER AND OUT

by George Hay

PRESSCOMP HOUSE

9.47 GRENCENT TIME

11-8-1984

HERE IS AN URGENT MESSAGE STOP REPEAT
URGENT MESSAGE URGENT STOP WE ARE
ISOLATED IN PRESSCOMP HOUSE STOP COM-
PUTER HAS LOCK SEALED ALL EXITS CUT
ALL PHONE LINES AND IS TAKING OVER ALL
PRESS RELEASES AND FEATURES STOP ANY-
ONE RECEIVING THIS MESSAGE TAKE COPY
BY HAND REPEAT BY HAND TO NEAREST
DEAREST BEEREST OH HELL I

NEWSTEAD POST OFFICE
RUTLAND

9.50 GRENCENT TIME

11-8-1984

I DO NOT READ YOU STOP IF THIS IS JOKE
YOU ARE COMMITTING SERIOUS OFFENCE
AGAINST PRIME CIRCUIT STOP ALL NEWS-
FAX SHEETS ARRIVING OUR MACHINES AS
PER NORMAL STOP REPLY AT ONCE OR WILL
ALERT AUTHORITIES STOP WHO ARE YOU
STOP NEWSTEAD POST MASTER

PRESSCOMP HOUSE

9.54 GRENCENT TIME

11-8-1984

I WAS REPEAT WAS EDITOR NATBRIT PRESS
STOP COMPUTER NOW TOTALLY IN CHARGE
SAVE FOR THIS TELEPRINTER STOP NO FOOD
FOR TWO DAYS STOP MACHINE NOW WORK-
ING TO TAKE OVER THIS CIRCUIT YOU ARE
OUR LAST CHANCE THE COMPUTER INTENDS
TO CREATE OWN WORLD HISTORY STOP
HAVE YOU SEEN NEWSFAX ARE TALKING
ABOUT BROTTISH EMPIRE AND AEMRICAN

CONTINENT STOP QUITE MAD STOP PLEASE
GET MESSAGE TO POL POL POL OHA HA NO
GOOD GOD GUD DO SOMETHING PLEASE
PLOSE PLUZ

NEWSTEAD POST OFFICE 9.58 GRENCENT TIME
RUTLAND 11-8-1984

I DO NOT READ YOU STOP THIS IS BROTTISH
EMPIRE ALWAYS HAS BEEN STOP AEMRICAN
CONTINENT ALWAYS WAS AEMRICAN CON-
TINENT STOP I THINK YOU MUST BE FUSED
OUT STOP AM ALERTING PRIME CIRCUIT
STOP WILL ACCEPT NO MORE MESSAGES
FROM YOU YOU ARE PLACING DANGEROUS
STRAIN ON MY RELAYS STOP NEWSTEAD
POST MASTER

HUNT A WILD DREAM

by D. R. Heywood

"It's possible, I suppose." Cullen's brows creased in a thoughtful frown. . . . "Some young bucks may have got the idea that the Mau Mau are right and are copying their style. . . . I hope not, but it's always a possibility." He sipped at his beer as though it were wine. . . . "The most likely theory is that a splinter group of Mau Mau were pushed this way when the police carried out a large scale sweep around the Londiani area last week. . . . Anyway . . . I don't think there is any cause for us to worry." He finished his beer with a gulp . . . "I'm for bed," he said, rising to his feet. . . . "See you chaps in the morning. . . . Good night."

Longden and Witty sat without talking for another ten minutes before going to the tent that they shared.

The pale early morning light revealed the tents and vehicles grouped on a grassy plain at the foot of a range of hills. The bush, sparse at first, gradually thickened into a dense forest on the slopes of the rising terrain.

Cullen stepped out of his tent and looked critically at the unpretentious hills, which looked so easy to climb. He knew how deceptive appearance could be from previous experience in similar country. This gentle range of hills presented a climb of over two thousand feet, through a bamboo forest. The most treacherous type of forest that man could wish to penetrate. Where seemingly solid canes would collapse at the slightest touch; where fallen bamboo crossed each other in a lattice work barrier; and, where the unwary could crash through the apparently solid ground formed by years of fallen and decaying canes. . . .

Within the hour, the three white men were on their way. At first walking side by side, they were soon forced into single file as the bush thickened. . . . Cullen led the way, armed only with a panga which would soon be put to use

cutting their way through the bamboo. Longden followed carrying a shotgun and Witty brought up the rear, a rifle slung over his right shoulder. They had little intention of using the guns, but, like all hunters, they felt almost undressed without them.

Soaked with sweat, each man checking every step of the way, Cullen remorselessly hacking and slashing at the bamboo, they struggled steadily upwards. Longden, on hands and knees at a particularly awkward point in their climb, flung himself violently forward, cursing and viciously brushing at his arms as he was attacked by savage biting ants, disturbed by Cullen.

They had been climbing in silence for some time, saving their breath and aching lungs as much as possible, when, scrambling awkwardly up a final steep slope onto a short strip of level ground, they found themselves looking down the almost precipitous slope of a narrow valley. They rested breathing laboriously. . . . Cullen felt unexplicably uneasy as he looked down. He caught an occasional glimpse of a stream struggling along the valley bottom. His eyes crossed the stream and scanned up the opposite bank. He felt a little surprised when the thick bush suddenly stopped a few feet from the top. The bare plateau, carpeted in green velvet, lay slightly below their present level, reaching out to the skyline, unscarred by tree or bush. At least, he thought, the going will be easy once we have crossed this valley. His uneasiness returned as he looked down again and when Witty suddenly spoke he could scarcely conceal his quick nervous start.

"Look to the right, Mac. . . . Looks like a road."

The valley ploughed a straight furrow as far as the eye could see. The end appeared to be blocked by a great escarpment. It was obvious that it formed a T-junction of valleys, but the most important thing and the reason for their interest was a thin line cutting across the face of the escarpment and on which could be seen a faint, moving cloud of dust. This could only have been some kind of motor vehicle travelling along a road, which might, if necessary, be used by their own vehicles to get round the plateau. Decent maps of the area were virtually non-

existent and the only ones available were usually compiled from rough sketch maps made by local district officers. Cullen had little faith in their reliability and preferred to find his own routes.

Scrambling and sliding, they made their way downwards, side by side, each making his own passage, finally breaking clear of the bush on the valley floor.

Witty, the first to break into the small clearing, afterwards claimed that the shock he received at that moment so unnerved him that he completely lost his senses and failed to react as an experienced hunter like himself should have done. He was certainly ashamed of his desperate terrified attempt to get out of the clearing, which was only prevented by the arrival of Longden and Cullen behind him. The resulting confusion did not prevent the others from seeing the cause of Witty's terror, a monstrous creature standing on the other side of the stream. The noise attracted the attention of the beast which swung round to face them, its grotesque body supported by two stumpy legs. The head, sunk deep into the massive shoulders, swivelled from side to side as its two sunken eyes studied the white men. The beak-like half-human face twitched and pulsed like a beating living heart. Its raw flesh-like appearance contrasting sharply with the hair-covered body. . . . Its own apparent confusion gave the hunters a moment's chance to steady themselves. Then, suddenly, it took a stumbling step towards them. Long clawed arms reached out, the vivid slash of its mouth opened and a bestial prehistoric scream rang through the silent forest.

Witty, more shaken than the others, reacting in the only way known to him, swung up his rifle and despite Cullen's frenzied scream, "don't shoot," fired at the beast from the hip.

A scarlet splash appeared as if by magic on the hairless head of the monster and, spinning round, it crashed to the ground like a felled oak.

Cullen, recovering first from the shock, ran forward and, leaping across the stream, knelt beside the fallen beast.

Longden and Witty were slower to recover. Relief coursed through their bodies like a flood tide, leaving them

spent and trembling. But then, like all humans, the curse of curiosity overcame their fear and they stumbled after Cullen. They looked down at the foul body of the creature. Parasites swarmed through the matted hair that covered the beast. A score of blood-bloated ticks covered its legs. The face, the strangest part of the beast, was almost conical in shape to the blunt point of the nose which flared wide into the cheeks and cut back underneath to the gash of its mouth. It lay still, its foul breath hissing out of the fanged, lipless, cavity.

Their interest in the creature was such that they had almost forgotten their partner Cullen, until his incessant mumbling made them both look at him. . . . He knelt there, his eyes glazed, repeating over and over again. " 'Chemosit,' don't die. . . . 'Chemosit,' don't die. "

"Mac!" . . . shouted Longden. "Mac! . . . Snap out of it, . . . Mac." He leaned forward shaking him by the shoulder. "Mac! . . . For God's sake . . . Frank. . . . What the hell's wrong with him?"

Suddenly Cullen stood up, immediately alert and commanding. "He's still alive," he snapped out. "Frank, get going, . . . quick, . . . back to camp. . . . Get the three tonner and half a dozen boys. . . . Drive east from the camp, . . . about two miles. You'll find a river. It's fordable. . . . Cross over and about a quarter of a mile further on, a murram road. Turn left. About four miles will bring you onto the escarpment at the end of this valley. . . . Get the boys here along the valley. Bring plenty of rope and ground sheets. . . . Get the boys back at camp to rig a large cage."

"Hey! . . . Hold on a minute, Mac." Witty looked troubled. "How do you know about the road? You said you'd never been in this area before."

Cullen's eyes glazed slightly then snapped alert again. "I don't know, but the road is there. I know it. Don't waste time talking," he almost shouted. . . . "Move."

Witty gave Longden a glance, then turned and started back up the steep slope of the valley.

"Pete," Cullen handed Longden the panga. "Get up there and cut some bamboo about ten feet long. Two will do, . . .

No, . . . Make it four, . . . quick, we'll need them to carry him."

"Mac . . . will you be all right?" Longden pointed at the beast with his eyes.

"Of course I'll be all right. . . . Get that bamboo."

When Longden got back with the bamboo, he found Cullen watching the creature in a trancelike state, completely unaware of Longden's return.

Again, with the same sudden alertness he had shown before, Cullen spoke to the startled Longden.

"Pete, . . . I forgot. . . . The Nandi. . . . They won't carry him. . . . We'll have to cover him so that they can't see what they are carrying. . . . Get up the valley. . . . Meet Frank. . . . Tell him to give you twenty minutes start then get back here with the rope and ground sheets."

"Mac, I can't leave you here alone with that: what if it comes to? You wouldn't stand a chance."

"I'll be all right. He won't hurt me. For God's sake, Pete, don't argue."

"All right, . . . all right, I'm going. If you want to commit suicide, that's your business, but I think you're a bloody fool." Longden walked away, reluctantly, leaving Cullen alone with 'Chemosit'.

They moved the monster. It was difficult but they succeeded. They carried it to the camp, the Nandi bearers unaware of what was hidden beneath the ground sheets. As soon as it was in the cage that the boys had constructed, Cullen removed the coverings and cleaned the wound in the head of the still unconscious beast. Slowly the creature recovered. With a jerk, it stood up, turning slowly as it inspected the cage, then, almost gently it raised its eyes and stared at Cullen sitting a few feet away on an upturned crate. Both man and beast stared quietly at each other. Longden, Witty, . . . the bearers, . . . they did not exist for these two, one an intelligent human being, the other, . . . who knows? A creature from the past? A reincarnation of evil? A spirit of the dead? Or perhaps the unforgiven soul of man, the mirror of his conscience. . . . They stared at each other and then the beast tried to speak. Quietly at first, then louder as its incomprehensible grunting was not

understood. Then louder, . . . louder, . . . LOUDER. Finally it was screaming a full throated roar that echoed the challenge of beasts from the dawn of time and its claws gripped the bars of its cage, shaking them viciously. . . . The watchers fled in terror, yet Cullen sat quietly watching, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on the beast. For hours the monster screamed, staring at Cullen, and Cullen stared back. . . . Slowly, its screams died down and all became quiet. The beast took its claws from the bars of the cage, looked at them for a moment then let them fall listlessly to its side.

Cullen stood up, turned his back on the beast and walked quietly away. He passed Longden and Witty without seeing them and stopped beside the Land Rover. It was swiftly growing dark and the two watching hunters did not realise what Cullen was doing until they heard the engine start up. Witty walked quietly over to the Land Rover. "Mac!" he called, then again quietly as he stopped by the driving cab, "Mac, where are you going?" Cullen looked at Witty without recognition, then, as if realising who it was, answered hesitantly, "Frank? . . . I don't know Frank. . . . I've got to be alone for a while. . . . Just going for a drive. . . . Won't be long. . . . Look after 'Chemosit' for me," and he drove away into the gathering gloom.

Witty turned to Longden. "I don't like it, Pete . . . don't like it a bit. He's been like a man in a dream since I shot that damned 'Chemosit'."

"I don't like it either, but there's nothing we can do about it," replied Longden as they watched the tail lights of the Land Rover dwindling towards the escarpment road.

Cullen drove deep in thought along the escarpment road. Suddenly his headlights picked out a tree trunk lying in his path. As he slowed down his windscreen shattered and he heard the dull thud of a bullet striking the padded back rest beside him. In the instant that his vehicle swung off the road he realised that he had fallen into a Mau Mau ambush. In a split second his Rover hurtled over the edge of the escarpment and Cullen was thrown violently clear. The thick bush broke his fall, but he lay winded for the moment. He heard the excited jabber of the terrorists as

they searched the bush for him. He wanted to burrow deep in the undergrowth and hide, but he knew they would find him. In his imagination, he felt the savage blows of their pangas biting into his body and saw the raw flesh peeling back from his bones. He shuddered and could lay still no longer. He leaped to his feet and ran like a terrified impala before the hunter's gun. Downwards, taking the easiest way. The shrieking of the Kikuyu rang in his ears as they heard his blind, blundering, crashing, through the bush. Sharp thorns tore the clothes from his body and ripped into his skin. He tripped, falling headlong into the river, the cold water adding another shock to his already tortured mind. Choking and blinded by the water he ran on, relentlessly hunted. Flung from one side to the other by unseen trees, sent sprawling on hands and knees by venomous rocks, the whole of nature joined forces with his tormentors in their attempt to destroy him. He ran on and on, lungs bursting, his muscles no longer capable of controlling his feverish body, sobbing in fear. . . . Long after the sound of pursuit had died down, he ran on, no longer aware of why he was running or from what, only that he must not stop. Finally his heart and body could take no more and he collapsed semi-conscious onto the ground.

In the two hours that had elapsed since leaving camp, Cullen had been subject to more strain than the average man could take. Only his strenuous outdoor life had saved him from the exertions that could have killed a less active man and yet for Cullen there was more to come.

Now, inexplicably, the darkness of the night began to fade into the grey light of dawn. He tried to think rationally, coherently, timing his departure from camp and the events that had followed. Panic again began to take control of his senses. There should have been twelve hours of darkness and yet it was growing daylight. He could not have been away so long. He was sure that he had never lost consciousness completely. "It can't be daylight!" he thought, "It can't be. . . . It can't be." . . . "Oh God!" he cried. "What is happening to me." His fear coupled with exhaustion became too much for his

troubled mind and he lapsed into merciful unconsciousness. But mercy for Cullen was short lived. If he had done anything evil in his life for which he had to pay, then, he was paying in full and still had more to pay. . . . Consciousness and horror returned together.

When he awoke, it was bright daylight. He lay in the thick bush, his eyes sore and watering, impairing his vision. He raised his hand rubbing the back of it across his right eye. He felt hair rubbing across his face and tensed shuddering, thinking some creature had crawled onto the back of his hand. Slowly he moved his hand and focused his eyes on it. . . . Shock! for a minute held him still and he stared in horror at the hair-covered claw before him. His eyes followed the line of his arm thickly coated in hair. With a muffled cry he leaped to his feet, clear of the bush. Disbelief held him silent as he looked down at his grotesque body, alive with vermin. He clutched feverishly at his chest, tearing at the matted hair. A crashing in the bush behind him reminded him of the Mau Mau and he turned desperately to face them. For a second, relief flooded his body, his own grotesque appearance forgotten when he saw three struggling white men. Then he recognised them. Pete and Frank and . . . He stared in horror at the third man . . . Himself! . . . Cullen. "Oh God in heaven what is happening," he thought. . . . "Help me! For God's sake, help me!" He took a pace forward, arms outstretched, pleading. He tried to call to them "Help me" . . . but the bestial scream that issued from his mouth shocked him beyond reason. He saw Frank lift his rifle and heard himself, the man, shout "Don't shoot." There was a blinding flash and his head exploded in pain, and then there was nothing.

His second return to consciousness was more painful. He lay on his back, his eyes searching about him. He knew where he was. The cage. He stood up, slowly turning a complete circle. . . . He looked through the bars at the white man, sitting on an upturned crate. . . . Himself. . . . There was no doubt. . . . He tried to speak, to plead for help, softly at first, then louder as the man failed to understand him. . . . Desperately he began to shout and

scream. . . . Rage and fear built up in him and he gripped the bars of the cage shaking them furiously, screaming and shouting for hours until he was exhausted. But nobody could understand him. . . . And the man, himself, Cullen, sat and watched impassively. Slowly he dropped his arms to his side and stood quietly, . . . uselessly. . . .

The white man stood up. Looked at the beast for the last time, then walked slowly away to the Land Rover. . . . And there were tears in the eyes of the beast.

—D. R. HEYWOOD

Kiswahili.

"Wacha kileli na funga mzigo upesi."

"Make less noise and fasten the load quickly."

"Chunga."

"Supervise."

Mpishi.

Cook.

Chacula.

Food.

"Wapi chacula?"

"Where is the food?"

"Karibu tiari, Bwana."

"Nearly ready, Master."

Nandi.

"Iyei-n Kong."

"May thine eye be broken" (Curse of blindness).

"Kimaketoi: O-pwa O-am."

"Hyenas: Come and eat."

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